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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial Note

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Thematic Anniversary Issue of *the English Teacher*

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Liberating the Minds and Actions of English Language Teachers

In 2021, *The English Teacher*, one of the two journals published by the Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (MELTA), commemorates its 50th year of publication, making it the oldest continuously published journal in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Malaysia. *The English Teacher* promotes research and reflections on English language teaching and learning practices, and policies at all levels of education. This aim continues to underlie the spirit of the journal and echoes the words of the late Tun Hamdan Sheikh Tahir upon launching *The English Teacher* in 1971:

> "All information gained, whether by researchers or classroom teachers should
> be pooled and disseminated as widely as possible so that all involved in the
> teaching of this subject will benefit. Hence the birth of T*he English Teacher* is
> most opportune." (cited by Nair, 2016, p. 62)

The sustainability of *The English Teacher* over the last fifty years is largely due to the commitment of the various Chief Editors and their editorial teams, the advisory board and reviewers. To publish issue after issue, year after year is no mean feat, and this would not have been possible without the support from MELTA's leadership who also provided technical and administrative assistance for the journal.

To celebrate the journal's golden anniversary, we feature eight papers on the theme of teacher agency at various levels of education. This theme was selected because there is often a sense

of disconnect between policy and practice, and a sense of disempowerment among educators about what they want to do for their learners, and what they are 'allowed' to do. Priestly, Biesta and Robinson (2013) expound on the idea that teacher agency concerns both the personal and professional experience of the teacher and, according to them, the achievement of agency has always been informed by past experience and is often orientated towards the future in achieving certain goals and values. They further explicate that teacher agency is always enacted in a concrete situation which may constrain and support the structural, cultural and resources made available to the teachers.

In fact, our existence in this world can be marked through our ability to make choices and decisions in our lives which can be achieved through the types of education that we receive. Nelson Mandela once said that education is the most powerful weapon which can be used to change the world. Educators, therefore, play an integral role not only in the dissemination of knowledge but also as actions that change students' present and future lives.

English language educators at all levels have many demands thrust upon them. They are deemed to be models of 'good' English, and as people responsible for ensuring that students achieve the desired levels of proficiency and communication skills. At the same time they are expected to be innovative and creative, with the agility to learn and adapt to new teaching, learning and assessment methods. Over the last one year, this has meant having to switch to online methods literally overnight due the closure of schools and institutions of higher education due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic also highlighted the need for educators to have empathy and compassion for students' plights, difficulties and challenges. In the case of English language educators, this is not just in relation to students having to learn it as a second or foreign language, but is also related to other challenges, for example, the status of English and its varieties, attitudes and perceptions towards learning and using English, in addition to changing language and language education policies. However, despite top down policies and instructions, and standardised curricula and assessment, there is still room for self-awareness as educators constantly and critically reflect on their decisions and actions, and think about how these practices can impact their students' lives.

With reference to ELT, liberating the mind and actions of English language teachers is the essence of transforming language learning and education. As part of professional growth, reflections of their practices can liberate them, grounding them into the realities of the teaching and learning contexts and emancipating them from feeling disempowered and helpless to solve problems creatively. Such decisions and actions can be rewarding for teachers in terms of self-fulfillment and professional development.

As previously mentioned, this thematic anniversary issue of *The English Teacher*, features eight articles. We begin the issue with Setiano Sugiharto's article, *Teachers Agency as the Technology of Self and as Actionality: Implications for ELT Micro-centric* Policy Making, which critically examines the notion of teacher agency in light of two conceptual frameworks: technologies of the self and transitionalist-actionistic, or conduct pragmatism. The author posits the idea of how teachers' role can be crucial in creating a micro-centric policy of teaching and learning English which is enacted by individual teachers through their classroom setting.

The second article by Kristof Savski discusses the prominence given to the Common European Language Reference (CEFR) in the *English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025* and how such a document has an impact on the local agency in the Malaysian context. This article is positioned within the framework of language policy and examines the role of CEFR in the global and Malaysian context. It provides alternatives for using CEFR within a localised model which is socio-culturally mindful of the diversity and multilingualism of the Malaysian teachers and learners.

The next article details out the conceptual configurations of teacher agency by drawing on the teacher agentive acts in the process of collaborative expertise building. Here, Ruanni Tupas in *Teacher Agency Through Collaborative Expertise-building* focuses on selected tertiary education in South East Asia, and discusses how teacher agency is conceptualised as an *accomplishment* of acts of producing knowledge for teacher's professional practice.

In *Every Teacher a Changemaker: Reflections on Teacher Agency and Empowerment*, Chau Meng Huat and Krishnavanie Shanmugam reflect on their own experiences to explore teacher agency through the notion of teacher as changemaker. In this article, the authors highlight the fact that teachers are not only changemakers in their own right but they also enable others to be changemakers.

The article by Alexius Chia, Stefanie Chye, and Bee-Leng Chua, T*he Autonomous Thinking Teacher: Preparing English Teachers for the 21st Century* is also based on the reflections of teachers, this time from those in initial teacher preparation (ITP) programmes in Singapore. The authors show how a Professional Practice and Inquiry initiative in the programme helped English pre-service teachers to develop into autonomous thinking teachers.

Ngee Derk Tiong's article, *The Weight of Our Words: Language and Teacher Agency from the Perspective of Gee's 'Cultural Models'*, looks at another way that teacher agency can be developed. Based on an analysis of Malaysian English-language teachers' meetings, Tiong suggests that how teachers talk about the relevant domains of their practice can result in shifts to cultural models that are more agentic or otherwise.

The power of teacher-related discourse is further reiterated in the article by Ramesh Nair. In *Reconstructing Teacher Identity through Contesting Narratives of ELT Associations*, Nair draws on the frameworks of Systemic-Functional Linguistics and visual grammar to demonstrate how discourse in posters disseminated through MELTA's social media platforms highlights teachers as trained professionals and experts in the field of ELT. He argues that such positive representation of teachers can counter negative and damaging discourses about teachers, and thus, points out that ELT associations can play a role to mitigate emerging discourses which threaten the reputation of the teaching profession.

The final article by Tamas Kiss and Hazelynn Rimbar, *English language Teacher Agency in Sarawak: Exploiting Teaching Materials,* explores English language teacher agency within the context of materials exploitation. The authors indicate that the use of international books in all primary schools have been a challenge to many English teachers in the rural areas of Sarawak,

and thus, these teachers have taken actions to enact their professional beliefs and values which have strengthened their agential roles.

We are hopeful that these articles on the various facets of teacher agency will encourage us to reflect on our own assumptions and practices. The seminars, workshops and conferences organised by MELTA as well as this journal provides excellent platforms for English language educators to develop agency through continuous learning and through the sharing of experiences, practices, and research. Thus, we hope to 'hear' more of your voices at these platforms.

Acknowledgements

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Article

Teacher Agency as Technologies of the Self and as Actionality: Implications for ELT Micro-Centric Policy Making

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the notion of teacher agency in light of two important conceptual frameworks: technologies of the self and transitionalist-actionistic, or conduct pragmatism. Using the former framework, teacher agency was analyzed in terms of its inherent status and dynamic flux within one's self, while using the latter it was scrutinized for its transitional-actionistic nature triggered by one's action or conduct. The article then argues that viewing teacher agency from these two vantage points can contribute to our understanding of the crucial role a teacher can play in creating a micro-centric policy of teaching and learning English in a specific locality, as well as of the enactment of this policy by individual teachers in a classroom setting. Implications for this critical examination of teacher agency include the import of the (re)activation of teacher agency, and its enactment both in the policy-making processes and in the teaching practices.

KEYWORDS: teacher agency, technologies of the self, transitionalist-actionistic or conduct pragmatism, micro-centric policy of teaching and learning English

Introduction

In the context of teacher professional development, the notion of teacher agency constitutes a vital element, as it has been argued that teacher agency plays an instrumental role in maintaining institutionalized instructional practice (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015), in enhancing professional development and school reform (Imants & der Wal, 2020), as well as in bridging theory and practice (Heikkilä, Iiskala, & Mikkilä-Erdmann, 2020). Ineluctably, a plethora of studies on teacher agency has cast important light into how agency is conceptualized, perceived and constructed, and how it contributes to the overall quality of education. Nonetheless, the discussions about agency in general, and teacher agency in particular, have yet to explicate more on how individual teachers constantly shape and reshape their potential self within the dominion and

pressure of educational policies that are often designed in a top-down fashion. Drawing on Foucault's (1988) conceptual framework of "technologies of the self", as well as on Koopman's (2014) idea of "transitionalist-actionistic, or conduct pragmatism", the article will elucidate the notion of teacher agency from these two vantage points. In light of the former, agency is seen as a construct inherent in one's self in that it cannot only be constructed and reconstructed, but can also be self-fashioned by virtue of one's interest. In this sense, agency is a dynamic entity which changes over time. As for the latter, agency is viewed as residing neither in one's cognitive capacity, nor in one's experiences, but rather in one's conducts or acts. So construed, agency is not constitutive, but performative. The article has three objectives:

- First, it reviews and examines previous studies on teacher agency in the context of teachers' professional development in general, and of English language pedagogy in particular, and suggests that an alternative perspective of viewing the notion of agency be needed.

- Second, it proceeds to the discussion of this alternative perspective drawn upon the theoretical perspectives proposed above.

- Third, it discusses the implications of the alternative perspective of teacher agency for the English language teaching (henceforth ELT) policy making.

In relation to these objectives, the following questions are worth putting forward:

- How do individual teachers interrogate educational ELT policies – which are often one-sidedly imposed on them – in their specific local sites?

- How can they articulate their voices in negotiating these policies and create their own micro-centric policy?

- How may they deal with the possible physical, ideological and cultural challenges which may not necessarily accord with their own interests?

In so doing, the article is expected to spark new insights into how teacher agency should be construed and enacted in the context of teaching English in a specific locality.

Teacher Agency: Insights from Previous Studies and Theorization

Interests in theorizing and studying teacher agency have been motivated primarily by the multifaceted aspects of the notion of agency itself. Indeed, a burgeoning study on the issue has testified the robustness of the term. Samoukovic (2015), for example, views teacher agency from the perspective of critical pedagogies, focusing specifically on the power relations both in societies at large and institutional contexts like schools. From her research, she argues that teacher agency needs to be expanded by establishing connections with the societies, so as to become a collective agency. While, as Samoukovic (2015) further asserts, that individual agency has its own merits and potentials "to broaden a teacher's sphere of influence", but it can also "strip a teacher of a protective shield of the system-in-place—if the aim of an action collides with the system-in-place's established procedures" (p. 161). It is therefore collective agency that is seen as having "transformative practices" in balancing this quandary.

Another study on agency was revealingly carried out by Bridwell-Mitchell (2015), who views agency from the sociological point of view. Attempting to advance a theory of teacher agency,

Bridwell-Mitchell wanted to discover how teacher agency can both change and maintain institutionalized instructional practices in schools. Findings from the study yielded three mechanisms which drive a particular form of teacher agency: (1) peer learning, (2) patterned social interactions, and (3) shared understandings, aims, and practices. Each of these mechanisms, as Bridwell-Mitchell went on to aver, is "moderated or regulated by a set of counterbalancing forces" (p.148); for example, (1a–b) innovation versus socialization in peer learning, (2a–b) diversity versus cohesion in social interactions, and (3a–b) cognitive and normative divergence versus convergence in shared understandings, aims, and practices. With this counterbalancing forces, Bridwell-Mitchell concluded that "the balance among these forces determines whether the dynamics of each mechanism support institutional persistence or change" (p. 148).

Rostami and Yousefi (2020) have investigated how agency is exercised among the novice English teachers in Iran using the complexity dynamic/system perspective. This study has revealed that teachers practiced agency by employing dialogic feedback, positioning, and critical incidents. Similar to Samoukovic's (2015) argument, agency is conceptualized through the interdependent of agents in the learning environment, and its emergence is a result of complex negotiation between teachers' identity and environment. In essence, this study stresses the importance of collaboration and interaction between teachers and their environment for practicing and enacting agency. Obviously, the interlocking connection between one's identity and environment in the study aims to achieve collective agency.

No less illuminating study was conducted by Heikkilä, et al., (2020), who have investigated teacher agency from a teacher education lens. They have argued that the notion of teacher agency, or precisely what they call "professional agency," can be best understood from the idea of ownership and authority over learning in a specific sociocultural context. This is of paramount importance, as they contend, especially if there is a divide between theory and practice in the field of teacher education. It is important to note that to a large extent what is theorized by researchers is not necessarily compatible with what is practiced by teachers in classroom. From their studies, Heikkilä et al. have found that agency as voiced by their student teacher participant was always in dynamic flux, unstable, and changing, all of which indicate the dynamics of the nature of agency. Due to this dynamic, they urged the importance of integration between theory and practice.

Conceptualizing agency from the vantage point of ecology, Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2020) have argued that agency does not reside in an individual person, but "as an emergent phenomenon of actor-situation transaction" (p. 626). As they have pointed out:

> Agency, in other words, is not something that people can have – as a property, capacity or competence – but is something that people do. More specifically, agency denotes a quality of the engagement of actors with temporal–relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves (p. 626).

Their study focusing on the role of belief in teacher agency buttresses this argument. Despite the fact that there are contradictory findings in teacher belief about agency, this does not diminish the values of agency teachers hold in their practices. The point is rather "the promotion of teacher

agency does not just rely on the beliefs that individual teachers bring to their practice, but also requires collective development and consideration" (Biesta, *et.al.*, 2020, p. 624).

Needless to say, all of the studies on and theorizations of teacher agency reviewed above, irrespective of their foci, have provided us with valuable insights, in that the notion of agency in general and teacher agency in particular are by no means monolithic entities. It is dynamic and changing over time. It is context-bound and socially-embedded. It is thus a multifaceted notion which is subject to multiple interpretations, and hence manifestations, depending upon which perspectives or vantage points one holds. Most importantly, the studies reviewed above have attempted to demonstrate that the enactment of teacher agency in a specific context of practices is crucial for the enhancement of teachers' professional development and pedagogy. For instance, Heikkilä's et al. (2020) idea of professional agency, which views a teacher as an authoritative figure in managing the instructional contexts situated in their sociocultural teaching and learning sites, Rostami and Yousefi's (2020) notion of dialogic feedback, and Samoukovic's (2015) term of collective agency all aim to boost teachers' professional development and pedagogical competence, as these notions imply efforts on the part of teachers to create a space for their professional agentive capacity. With the authority they own and the engagement (through dialogic feedback) with educational stakeholders, teachers will eventually become independent and autonomous in determining their instructional plans and goals, and are able to negotiate institutional and structural policies that may be out of sync with their specific learning sites. It is only through such a continuous process of engagement with the structural and institutional challenges can English language teachers develop their professional and pedagogical skills or competences to the fullest.

Yet what these studies have in common is that they overemphasize the dynamism of agency by virtue of its embeddedness with social conditions or social relations into which agency is shaped and reshaped. Though such a vitality of agency is difficult to refute (and it is not my intention to do so here), we should not lose sights of the fact that agency is still an important property residing in individual person, and that within individuals it is already a dynamic notion *per se*. Obsession in framing its vitality in terms of its social embeddedness can, in my view, summarily dismiss the idea of agency as a vibrant individual property. For Bandura (2006), agency is inseparable with one's self, for it is the capacity of individuals to initiate intentional acts.

Biesta, et.al., (2020) have previously reminded us of the dynamic of agency, arguing that it is what people *do*, not what people *have* (as property, capacity or competence). This is a plausible argument, insofar as it encompasses a dynamic (do), rather than a stative (have) verb. However, the case they are making with the "do" is the *doing* in relation to the social relation, which is… a quality of the engagement of actors with temporal–relational contexts-for-action… (p. 626). What they seem to overlook is the doing within individuals, a quality and capacity inherent within one's self. It is the unearthing of this quality that seems to have had insufficient attention in the discussion of teacher agency.

Re-conceptualizing Teacher Agency

In this section, I will first argue that the notion of agency needs to be re-conceptualized in light of how one can exercise freedom in the enactment of agency. Foucault's idea of technologies of the self is employed here as a framework of thinking. These technologies are "no longer connected to particular forms of knowledge or institutions, but which have validity in all societies, whatever they are" (Nilson, 1998, p. 97). Understanding this idea is of paramount importance before we can embark on the concept of agency as conduct or actionality within an individual.

Agency as Technologies of the Self

A most crucial factor in discussing teacher agency is, in my view, strongly related to the amount of freedom a teacher can exercise to manifest his agency. Freedom becomes an essential element of the enactment of agency. The issue of freedom is hardly elevated in any discussion of teacher agency, and if it is raised as a focus of inquiries, it is given a scant attention. On the face of it, freedom in exercising agency ought to be viewed as a practice of freedom. This can be done through explicating Foucault's idea of technologies of the self, or as Nilson (1998) calls it "the technologies of the self as practices of freedom" (p. 97). The Foucaldian notion of freedom here is interpreted by Nilson (1998) not as freedom in a very general term such as that of freedom of speech guaranteed by state or law, but as "technologies of mastery, which are based on the individual's relation to himself and others" (p. 98). To this, Martin (1988) said that "true freedom was the moral freedom of a philosophical self-knowledge which recognized and conformed to an assumed orderly principle of the cosmos" (p. 51). Construed in the latter sense, "freedom is *practised*, and not how one frees oneself (p. 98) [italic in original]. Borrowing Foucault, Nilson (1998) relates practices to self-technologies governmentality.

Technologies of the self is one among the four types of technologies elucidated by Foucault (1988). This specific type of technologies aims to "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1988 p. 18). It is clear here that agency as a capacity of individuals requires freedom as a requisite to enact agency.

Critical, sociological, and ecological perspectives of agency used as philosophical orientations to the studies reviewed above have fallen short of fathoming the essential condition of freedom in the agency enactment. Take a specific perspective of critical pedagogies. With the backdrop of this perspective, the so-called "collective agency" has been argued to have a transformative capacity in a situation where the unequal power relation persists. The problematics that remain here are how one can exercise and unleash freedom to enact one's individual agency, and then to establish connections with societies so as to pursue collective agency. To make things more complicated, how can in the end an equal power relation in an institutional context like schools be attained unless it remains unclear how one practices freedom to enact one's agency? These are some major problematics that these critical and other perspectives have failed to address. Obviously without knowledge of oneself as the fundamental principal in this modern world (Foucault, 1988), the problems will remain intact and be insurmountable.

One plausible way to find the solution to the quandaries is that we treat agency as individuals' capacity or property inherent in our self –as part that constitutes technologies of the self. In doing so, we will eventually be cognizant that agency is inescapable from oneself, that it is governed by oneself, and that whose enactment depends on the freedom we unleash through self- technologies governmentality. It is in fact the individual persons who can govern their own bodies, souls and thoughts to enact their agentive capacity.

It is important to reiterate here that placing a trust in agency as an inherent property of individual is not meant to repudiate the import of establishing a social rapport to attain a collective agency, as well as to deny its ecological embeddedness. Rather, it is intended to set up the priority of knowing oneself – the excavation and exploration of technologies of the self.

Agency as Actionality

To manifest agency in concrete situations (i.e. to realize its social and ecological alignment), it is incumbent upon as to understand its unstable and transitional nature. This is to say that agency is what we perform as part of our technologies of the self. Agency then is a conduct or actionality within individuals. This perspective of agency allows us to broaden our perception that agency is a dynamic notion, and is always in motion and in transition within oneself. As Koopman (2014) puts it: "Conduct is, in every instance, in motion. Conduct is pre-eminently a doing rather than a thing done" (p. 167). On the contrary, seeing its dynamic in relation to the engagement of social relations misses much of its dynamic within individual teachers, and tends to resort to a thing done. It is rather surprising that though Biesta et al. (2020) do acknowledge and attribute their ecological approach to studying agency to the pragmatist philosophy, they seem to have diverted the *doing* to overcoming the problems arising in a certain situation. As such, agency is defined as "an emergent phenomenon of actor-situation transaction" (Biesta et al., 2020, p. 626). While this extension is plausible, an overemphasis on this will result in the undermining of the dynamic of agency within individuals.

It is thus incumbent upon us to a have closer look at how agency is manifested through conduct or action. The details of the idea of actionality are well expressed by Koopman and Garside (2019) below:

>According to this actionistic perspective, it's all motion. That which seem such changeable is always somehow already becoming something other than it just was. Nothing is unmoving though there is much that appears this way because it moves at an exceedingly slow rate of change. But nothing is forever sat still (p. 741).

Construing agency in this actionistic sense implies the continuous construction and reconstruction of one's self, to begin with, before one can make an engagement with others. As part of technologies of the self, agency needs to be manifested through conduct so as to have the effects both on the individuals themselves, as well as on others. The dynamic of teacher agency ought to be realized through conduct or action in real circumstances. Thus, agency as actionality does not repudiate the import of the embeddedness of action in relation to the social relation. In fact, as Koopan and Garside (2019) have argued, the idea of "actionistics are not necessarily restrained to

being individual humans" (p. 742). It urges instead the establishment of priority over the doing – from oneself then to the others.

Most importantly, viewing agency as actionality might also open up "the ontology of agency and multiplies possible answers to the ever-present question of 'who' the subject of action is" (Koopman & Garside, 2019, p. 743). Actionistic perspective of agency then allows us to see, reflect, and explore our agentive capacity in a contextual and meaningful fashion, prior to its alignment to the social realities. To the extent that social and material worlds accordingly affect the enactment of agency does not render the idea of agency devoid of its ontological basis residing in individuals. Neither does this imply a state of immobility of agency. Quite the opposite, social, critical, and ecological perspectives of agency further strengthen the notion of agency both as technologies of the self and as conduct and action.

Enacting the Re-conceptualized Agency through the Art of Articulation: Implications for ELT Micro-Centric Policy Making

With the reconceptualization of agency both as technologies of the self and as actionality, how can an individual teacher, and probably a group of teachers especially those who teach English in a specific local site, enact their individual and collective agency? Further, in a certain educational practice where policies are often one-sidedly imposed on them, how do English language teachers (individually and collectively) interrogate them?, how can they articulate their voices in negotiating the ELT policies, so as to create their own micro-centric policy that fits to their local cultural and linguistic needs and purposes ?, and how can they deal with the possible physical, ideological and cultural challenges which may not necessarily accord with their own interests.

Based on the alternative understandings of agency as technologies of the self and agency as actionality elucidated above, I propose here the idea which captures these understandings well–*the art of articulation* initially conceptualized by Gallagher (2012) as an act of one's self-expression and the juxtaposition of two entities relationally. For Gallagher, the art of articulation is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve the end. It is not aimed at achieving permanent and predictable educational outcomes, but rather an on-going dynamic practice. In essence, "articulation is always a matter of struggle in a war of positions where nothing is certain ahead of time but rather a matter of practice. No outcome can be guaranteed [. . .] by the laws of history but must be determined concretely at specific conjunctures of history" (Trimbur, 2011, as cited in Gallagher, 2012, p. 58). Clearly, the conceptualization implies the technologies of the self as practices of freedom, that is, self-technologies governmentality, as well as an ongoing conduct and action.

As the idea of micro-centric policy making in ELT has now been gaining tractions among scholars (see Sugiharto, 2021), one's art of articulation is highly germane, for it can pave the way for the teachers to contest any ideological stances (infused in the policy) that are felt incompatible with their specific sites and localities. In fact, one essential facet in the micro planning is the recognition of teacher agency and transformation (Sugiharto, 2021). In this policy perspective, agency resides in individual teachers as policy makers, thus enabling them to exercise their latitude to determine what and how to teach, to develop a plan for action, and consequently who "hold agency and

create what can be recognized as a language policy and plan to utilize and develop their language resources; one that is not directly the result of some larger macro policy, but is a response to their own needs, their own 'language problems', their own requirement for language management" (Baldauf, 2006, p. 155).

To implement this micro planning, it is imperative to fathom the conception of ELT not as an innocent practice. Instead, we need to view ELT practices as a politically- and ideologically contested site. Both political and ideological awareness are vital in the creation of micro language planning (Manan, Channa, Khemlani David, and Amin 2021). That is, ELT practices are a site where the created policies are not neutral-free, but are always produced and reproduced subjectively by collective parties involved in the policy making. On the face of this, teachers need to develop a critical consciousness to interrogate the policy by (re)activating their agentive capacity to successfully implement the micro-centric policy. Consider, for example, the case of the implementation of the English language teaching policy in a local site like multilingual and multiethnic Indonesia (Sugiharto, 2020) where almost all privately-run schools are the fertile ground for the reproduction of an English monolingual ideology. These schools have been strictly imposing the state-mandated English-Only-Policy. In such a situation the class instruction is conducted exclusively in English, and the use of translanguaging by mixing English with the students' native languages is strongly prohibited. Yet, as the teachers found this policy not always viable, given the students' varied English proficiency levels, they often interrogated this policy surreptitiously by resorting to the Indonesian language when interacting with the students in the classroom. Such is the case where teachers attempt to treat a classroom as a dynamic communicative space where they enact their agency, so as to meet their students' communicative needs. Despite the fact that this agency enactment was done on the sly, the teachers are able to (re) activate and perform their agentive capacity, creating a spontaneous micro-centric policy that covertly, but strategically resists the English monolingual ideology.

Another compelling instance elucidating the enactment of the power of individual agency in a local site is a study by Manan et al., (2021). Manan et al. (2021) have shown the prevalence of English monolingualism ideology in elite schools in Pakistan where teachers are strictly proscribed to use students' native languages in a classroom interaction. Teachers will risk losing their career if they interact using mixed linguistic codes. Manan et al., (2021) have found that despite the strict implementation of the English-centric policy, the Pakistani teachers managed to create "agentive spaces of a multilingual environment" where they explored their agentive capacity and critically interrogate and resist the policy. In so doing, the teachers have demonstrated their strong convictions about their own genuine teaching experiences, as well as the complexities of English language teaching practices in a local context which cannot be prescribed and pre-determined by the English-centric policy.

From the instances above we can infer that we cannot rule out the possibility that there exists "authoritarian tendencies, whose educational manifestation is an epiphenomenon of broader social and political machinations" (Koopman & Garside, 2019, p. 744). The English-centric policy is just one instance. We can therefore plausibly surmise that educational products may contain subjectivities and biases which might not necessarily be congenial to classroom teachers who put

them in practice. In this respect, the products can always be contested, and are therefore subject to negotiation and resistance.

The art of articulation plays a vital role here, in that it provides a space for the enactment of agency. It affords teachers the opportunity to negotiate tensions that may exist when they juxtapose the imposed language policy *vis-à-vis* their very agency articulated in the form of the *de facto* language policy. It is very encouraging to witness a shift of orientation in language planning and policy scholarship which no longer views policy as" totalizing entities that happen to people or that create hierarchies" to seeing policy as "realms where we start thinking more about what we can do with policies in the contingencies of our work" (Ramanathan & Morgan, 2007, pp. 450-451). Under the latter vantage point, language teachers are no longer seen as "passive recipients of fixed, immutable codes", but instead as "active sign-makers (p. 451). They are now *de facto* language planners and policy makers of the specific site where they conduct their teaching practices relative to their positionality.

The creation of *de facto* language policy as a micro-centric policy implies continuous endeavors of making a space of possibility, or in the ELT context, spaces of multilingual environment, as well as of struggling for articulating our voices to be heard and enacted. This can only be viable if we optimally exercise our self-technologies governmentality and conduct as a real manifestation of agency enactment both individually and collectively. Both governmentality and conduct in agency enactment need to eventually form a sediment, which is to say that they manifest as authority within individuals. The authority in practicing education is important, given the incessant cultural and ideological imposition from those who subscribe to the "epistemologically authoritarian visions of schooling" (Koopman & Garside, 2019, p. 744).

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Article

CEFR as Language Policy: Opportunities and Challenges for Local Agency in a Global Era

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ABSTRACT

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has become one of the most widely cited documents in language education across the globe, its influence now felt far beyond the confines of Europe, the context for which it was originally produced. In Malaysia, CEFR was given particular prominence in the *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025* and *English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025*, both of which positioned the framework as the primary yardstick by which curricula were to be developed and against which achievements (or lack thereof) were to be evaluated. This paper examines CEFR from the perspective of language policy, focussing particularly on the implications this document has for local agency in the Malaysian context. The paper begins by examining the constructs of language and language education underlying CEFR, pointing in particular to how these reflect the socio-political context for which the framework was developed. The next section examines how policy texts in the Malaysian context, in particular the 2015 Roadmap, have interpreted CEFR, highlighting in particular the way that these texts (as other policies across the globe) have tended to treat the CEFR reference levels as a global standard, with little scope for local agency. The final section considers alternative, localized models for using CEFR as language policy in Malaysia, in particular how the framework may be used in support of an inclusive agenda in which diversity and multilingualism are embraced.

KEYWORDS: language policy, CEFR, teacher agency, localization

Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has become one of the most widely used language policy documents over the last two decades. Starting, as its name suggests, as an instrument primarily aimed at the European context, the framework has spread far beyond the borders of that continent and become a feature of local language policy across a number of states (Byram & Parmenter, 2012). It has had a particular impact in Asia, where it has seen use by nations like Japan, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand – and Malaysia (Franz & Teo, 2017; Read, 2019; Author, 2019a, b, 2020). Key to the global spread of the framework is its purported universality, which is supposed to facilitate rapid, easy transferability of local qualifications between otherwise differing educational systems. Another source of popularity has been the widespread use of CEFR as a common point of reference for global testing (e.g. allowing neutral comparisons between IELTS and TOEFL) and global textbooks (e.g. allowing neutral comparisons between textbooks in a single series and their mapping to particular bands on global tests). In a globalized world characterised by intense exchange of people, knowledge, products and resources, being seen as universal point of reference has likely contributed to the popularity of CEFR.

A potential drawback of the search for global universality is that it may, when taken too far, compromise the agency of local actors in language policy, from those at the top level (government policymakers) to those at the grass roots (teachers). The key issue is that in order to achieve maximum universality, any large-scale global framework like CEFR must be minimally flexible, since significant variation between how it is interpreted and used may endanger its universality. This is at odds with the general need for policy of any kind to be open-ended enough to allow local actors an appropriate amount of leeway to take decisions based on their knowledge of the context in which they are working. Such flexibility is particularly key when it comes to language education policy at the global scale, since there are significant differences between different language ecologies and between the practical conditions individual educational actors have to consider when making decisions.

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine current uses of CEFR in Malaysian language policy from the perspective of local agency. I begin by introducing CEFR as a policy instrument, focussing especially on the conditions that motivated its development and on the key features of the orientation to language education that the framework is based on. The next section examines the way CEFR has been interpreted in recent Malaysian language policy texts, focussing particularly on how opportunities that the framework provides for local agency have been exploited. Finally, I highlight several overarching questions regarding how CEFR can be interpreted in light of Malaysia's language ecology, hoping to stimulate thought about how local conditions could be given a more prominent place in planning education according to global frameworks.

CEFR, its Origins and its Ideas

While CEFR was first published in 2001, its history is significantly longer than the roughly two decades that have elapsed since then. Its beginnings can be traced back to the 1960s, when descriptions of language proficiency began to be developed at the parent institution of CEFR, the

Council of Europe. This body, whose commitment to language policy issues is part of a broader focus on social cohesion, was at the time responding to a relatively clear set of practical issues in language education. These were related primarily to the increasingly close social, cultural and particularly economic ties among Western European nations, furthered by the establishment of the European Economic Community in 1967. While much of this integration revolved around facilitating exchange of resources and products between member states, it also involved the loosening of restrictions around migration. This was of particular value to more developed nations in Northern Europe, whose post-war redevelopment was often hampered by a lack of domestic workforce and who thus stood to benefit from immigration from other, less developed parts of Europe. Likewise, such population movement was desirable for southern European nations like Italy, Spain and Portugal, whose continued economic issues led to high rates of unemployment and welfare-dependency.

It is from considering the need for such migrant workers to be integrated in a new society that the earliest precursor of CEFR was developed. *Threshold*, which now broadly equates to level B1 on CEFR, aimed to provide an account of the minimal linguistic competences a migrant worker would need to function in a context where his/her first language was not the dominant language of communication (e.g. an L1 speaker of Italian working in Germany). As this was mainly aimed at blue-collar migrants, the situations described largely pertained to survival situations (e.g. shopping, travel, simple official matters) and general literacy (e.g. getting the gist of straightforward texts like immigration forms), thus generally not touching upon, for instance, the kind of literacy skills needed for office jobs or for higher education. *Threshold* was presented as a unitary description and thus did not present any of these competences scaled according to difficulty, as CEFR did later. Indeed, as *Threshold* offered no path for learners to follow in order to arrive at the target competence, it was noted by its authors that its demands on language learners "may appear to be very formidable indeed" (Van Ek & Trim, 1990, p. 9). This blind spot was addressed in subsequent years with the development of new descriptions, first of lower proficiency levels with *Waystage* (A2) and *Breakthrough* (A1), and later of higher (academic) proficiency with *Vantage* (B2). Two more levels of higher proficiency (C1 and C2) were added during the development of CEFR in the late 1990s, when all these descriptions of individual levels were redeveloped into now familiar sets of thematically-organized six-level scales.

As these scales have become the most often referred to part of CEFR (see for instance the policies discussed below), it is important to understand the process through which they were created. As has been remarked elsewhere (e.g. Hulstijn, 2007; Wisniewski, 2018), the scales were not developed on the basis of any particular theoretical model of language acquisition, nor do they explicitly follow any approach to language teaching. Rather, they were developed by pooling existing resources (*Threshold* and numerous others, including testing standards, textbooks, etc.) for descriptors of various kinds of specific language abilities. Through a succession of workshops conducted with foreign language teachers in Switzerland, these descriptors were then organized thematically, according to particular sets of skills they referred to (e.g. 'Writing correspondence'), and according to difficulty, with statistical calculations (Rasch modelling) used to identify boundaries between the six reference levels (for a detailed account, see North, 2000). Thus, the CEFR reference levels represent "scaled teacher perceptions" of language learners' development, not a theoretically-elaborated model of second language learning (North, 2014, p. 23).

While the resultant six levels have been the most cited part of CEFR, the framework consists of much more than these reference levels. Indeed, it may be argued that the descriptive scheme offered by the reference levels is merely a minor part of the overall package that CEFR represents, key to which is a holistic philosophy of language education policy and practice. A key element of this philosophy is the use of sociolinguistic analysis to describe the needs of prospective speakers of any given language in particular contexts and the resultant articulation of learning objectives according to specific actions that the analysis identifies as crucial to learners' needs. The resultant focus on actions, encoded in the framework's recognizable "can do" statements, is what differentiates this approach from those in the past, namely that it puts focus on the end product of learning (communicative action), not the individual building blocks of language (grammar, words) that may be needed to arrive at it (Piccardo & North, 2019). In pursuing such a philosophy, CEFR and its precursors are not unique, but rather reflect ongoing paradigm shifts in language education. There was much overlap between the development of documents like *Threshold* and early models of communicative language teaching (CLT), with the same broad philosophy shared by both (Trim, 2012).

Though this parallel early development led to many similarities between how competence in a second language was conceptualized by CLT and CEFR, these understandings have since drifted somewhat apart. Namely, while the focus of early CLT on communicative actions has been tempered by a resurgence of the form-focussed grammatical syllabus, particularly in what may be termed "commercial CLT" (i.e. that promoted by global ELT textbooks), the understanding of communicative competence that CEFR promotes has sought to evolve toward a dynamic, action-oriented vision in line with how contemporary perspectives in applied linguistics have put into question the view of a unitary, monolingual communicative competence (Canagarajah, 2018; Li, 2018). This is particularly clear when comparing the 2001 version of CEFR, whose somewhat rigid descriptions and apparent lack of tolerance for dynamicity and fluidity drew much criticism (Leung, 2013; Shohamy, 2011), to the recently published *Companion Volume* (Council of Europe, 2018), in which attempts have been made to move toward taking greater account of the complexity that characterises how multilingual speakers enter into communication. This was chiefly achieved through the addition of new scales to describe how users can pool resources from different languages to achieve their communicative purpose (plurilingual competence), how adept they are at crossing the boundaries of cultures (pluricultural competence) and how well they are able to aid others to communicate across the borders of languages and cultures (mediation competence). Accompanying literature has also attempted to position the descriptions provided by CEFR in light of a more holistic conceptualization of language education, the Action-oriented Approach, which attempts to articulate a more dynamic, fluid and changing vision of communicative competence (Piccardo & North, 2019). While these moves may be seen as being somewhat restricted by the continued reliance on the existing construct (Deygers, in press), they do reflect an attempt to move CEFR forward with contemporary theory in applied linguistics.

CEFR and Universality in Malaysian Language Policies

This section briefly discusses how CEFR has thus far been integrated in language policy in Malaysia. It does soon the basis of research conducted in 2017-19 with the aim of describing how

the key tenets of the framework were interpreted as it was transferred to the Thai and Malaysian policy contexts. The study involved a critical discourse analysis of documents from both contexts, focussing in particular on identifying what elements of CEFR were being transferred and what concepts these elements were linked with (for a more detailed account, see Author, 2019b). The data were three policy texts, a general education strategy (*Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-25*) and two strategies for English language education policy (*English Language Education in Malaysia: An Agenda for Reform 2015-25* and *English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-25*). Among these, significant differences exist, since while *Blueprint* makes reference to CEFR when setting overarching goals, its broader focus means that it provides less detail with regard to individual areas of education when compared to the two more specific policy texts, *Agenda* and *Roadmap*. At the same time, there are also many parallels, relating especially to the ubiquitous use of transnational comparisons in all three texts. In *Blueprint*, comparisons between Malaysia and other educational contexts are mainly made on the basis of instruments like PISA and TIMSS, which assess educational success or failure in broad terms (e.g. in terms of critical literacy and maths). When such comparisons are made with regard to Malaysian students' English proficiency in *Agenda* and *Roadmap*, CEFR tends to act as the frame of reference through which they are expressed:

> According to the Results Report Cambridge Baseline 2013 […], Malaysian English learners on average reach A1 by Year 6, and A2 by Form 3; they are still on average at A2 in Form 5, but the average is moving up to B1 by Form 6. A comparison with other countries using Cambridge Examination results […] puts Malaysia ahead of Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia and India, with substantially more evidence of B1 and higher, but behind a country like Brazil. However, European countries typically set B2 as the target on exit from secondary education, although this is actually reached only in Northern Europe […]. This confirms the expected situation, namely that the existing English language programme is adequate for traditional domestic purposes, but that we have to move up a level if we are to take our place among the advanced nations of the world. (*Agenda*, p. 18)

This extract exemplifies in very explicit terms the kind of discourse that transnational comparisons of educational success tend to generate (see e.g. Takayama, 2008; Waldow et al., 2014). Aside from a general diagnosis of current levels of domestic achievement (e.g. 'A2 by Form 3'), the text constructs a virtual 'league table' in which Malaysia is compared to other nations. Among these, what is worth pointing out is the foregrounding of regional competitors like Thailand and Indonesia and, in particular, the idealization of particular contexts – in this case, the rather vaguely identified 'European countries' and 'Northern Europe'. Despite its vagueness, such idealization of particular educational systems, often on the basis of stereotypes, is common in the kind of discourse that develops around transnational comparisons (Takayama, 2008). In such a competition-oriented discourse, the perceived superiority of such idealized contexts is then used to justify long-term goals, here by explicitly referring to the aspiration of Malaysia to achieve the status of an 'advanced nation'.

What must be considered in the present discussion is the rigid interpretation of CEFR that this discourse promotes. Through such comparisons, CEFR is likened to quantitative instruments like PISA, and to global English tests like IELTS, all of which are characterised by distance from any particular local context (being universally applied across the globe and administered by an

external, purportedly neutral body like the OECD, British Council, or Cambridge), and the resultant lack of agency that local actors have in relation to them. Such a view appears particularly relevant to how CEFR is understood in Agenda and Roadmap:

> Any country or other body that makes use of the CEFR is free to take as much or as little from it as is desired. But as in the case of the metric system, it makes sense to adopt the system as a whole. For example, in adopting the metric system, it would be possible – but pointless and foolish – to adopt metric weights but retain imperial miles and furlongs for distances. (*Roadmap*, p. 62)

This extract makes use of a metaphor to frame CEFR in a particularly salient way, establishing parallels to different systems of measurements and making an unfavourable comparison between the partial adoption of CEFR and the partial adoption of a system of measurements. Such a comparison is based on a set of presuppositions, as with all metaphors (Semino, 2008), regarding the properties of both domains which are being compared, language education policy (target domain) and physical measurement systems (source domain). Through this comparison and the accompanying assessments ('makes sense', 'pointless and foolish'), language education policy is implicitly portrayed as a domain where objective measurement is desired, where competing means of measurement are available (CEFR being one) and where such instruments are of a predetermined, inflexible nature (as is the case with physical measurement as a field). This kind of discourse positions CEFR as a universal system of measurement, one which local actors must adopt as a whole, in order to avoid disturbing its unquestioned internal logic, and over which they, implicitly, have no agency.

The point that must be highlighted here is that such a reading of CEFR, which is by far not unique to the Malaysian context and indeed represents the dominant manner in which the framework is interpreted, is highly problematic when considering its design. CEFR was not by any means intended to be used as an instrument for discrete measurement, since it neither contains a complete inventory of the features of communicative competence nor does it allow for their straightforward quantification. Rather, CEFR provides users with a number of scales containing textual descriptors, which can then be used as a heuristic to estimate a particular learner's existing level of ability and/or to make decisions regarding future learning goals. With such use in mind, the descriptors that the framework provides are generally worded in a relatively open-ended manner despite their relatively clear structure (with particular actions at the core), allowing for users to interpret their precise meaning according to the needs of a particular local context. Consider, for instance:

> Can recognise significant points in straightforward newspaper articles on familiar subjects.

> Can understand most factual information that he/she is likely to come across on familiar subjects of interest, provided he/she has sufficient time for re-reading.

> Can understand the main points in descriptive notes such as those on museum exhibits and explanatory boards in exhibitions (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 63).

These descriptors are provided at level B1 in the scale entitled 'Reading for Information and Argument' and contain various open-ended elements, particularly those used to describe the qualities of input text (What constitutes 'straightforward' or 'descriptive' text?), the ability of the speaker (What points in a text are 'significant'?), the range of potential areas (What topics are 'familiar'?) as we as conditions (How much time for re-reading is 'sufficient'?). This feature of CEFR has created issues in language testing, where such openness, or rather vagueness, can make the identification of a clear CEFR-aligned construct difficult (Alderson et al., 2006), and has led to significant disparities between tests nominally aimed at the same level (Deygers et al., 2018). This is compounded by the inherent incompleteness of CEFR, since the framework does not provide (and does not claim to provide) all-encompassing descriptions of proficiency at particular levels. The descriptors presented above, for instance, are not intended to catalogue the entire scope of abilities relevant to 'Reading for Argument and Information' at B1. Rather than constituting a list of everything a speaker at a particular level *needs to be able to do*, the descriptors provided are simply intended to provide examples of what a speaker of a particular proficiency *is likely to be able to do*. It is up to the users of CEFR to make these vague examples more specific and concrete by considering the context in which they are to be used. In the above case, we would for instance need to decide whether a text on the history of Penang, taken from a brochure handed out to tourists, would fall within the scope of 'familiar topics' of a particular set of speakers, and whether this genre is similar enough to those mentioned above (in particular 'descriptive notes [at] museum exhibits'). In some cases, we may thus also need to disregard particular descriptors if they are unsuited to a particular context, or to expand the descriptions provided with more information. Such flexibility is built into CEFR, but grass-roots actors like teachers must be provided sufficient agentive opportunities to take advantage of it.

What Counts as 'Can Do' in a Glocal Malaysia?

Having examined how the rigid interpretation of CEFR in Malaysian language policy departs from its flexible design, I now move to a broader discussion of some of the reasons why the framework needs to be re-interpreted according to local conditions in Malaysia. The reason why this question merits more attention stems from the differences between the sociolinguistic contexts of language education in Malaysia from that in Europe, where the framework was developed.

While, as I discuss above, the manner in which CEFR levels describe the development of language proficiency does not draw on any particular theory in second language acquisition, it does reflect certain assumptions regarding how acquisition of an L2 takes place in a particular sociolinguistic context. Much of CEFR appears to rest on the broad assumption that the L2 does not have any significant local role in the language ecology where the teaching/learning takes place, rather taking the role of a stereotypical 'foreign' language to which learners are primarily exposed through planned classroom instruction. The lowest CEFR reference levels (A1 and A2) reflect this, as they primarily describe the ability to perform the kinds of communicative tasks associated with everyday life (e.g. establishing social contact, asking for and providing personal information, etc.) that those learning a foreign language from scratch would have little familiarity with. Proficiency in performing such actions culminates at B1, which describes the "ability to maintain interaction and get across what you want to" as well as "to cope flexibly with problems in everyday life" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 34), primarily in the context of a society where the L2 is the dominant

language (e.g. an L1 speaker of Italian using German as an L2 in Germany). As discussed above, this reflects the history behind CEFR – B1 is the successor to *Threshold* and reflects its focus on describing the abilities needed to live and perform certain types of work as an immigrant. Above this level, CEFR descriptions begin to change, moving away from the previous focus on 'everyday' tasks and toward a more academic proficiency. Much of levels B2, C1 and C2 describe the kind of advanced literacy that is necessary either for the performance of more complex white-collar work (e.g. certain aspects of business administration) or for higher study in an L2-dominant environment. These levels are thus a reflection of the growing need in European education, particularly at the tertiary level, for a common point of reference regarding minimum entry requirements for students transferring from other educational systems (Deygers *et al*., 2018).

A number of points of potential incompatibility may be found between this idealized progression in L2 competence and the context of English language education in Malaysia. The most obvious of these is that, for a significant proportion of the population of Malaysia, English does play much more of a role in everyday life than would be the case in most of continental Europe. Though a straightforward Kachruvian categorization of Malaysia into the 'outer circle' can be disputed, both owing to local pushes toward the promotion of Bahasa Malaysia (Gill, 2014) as well as the inherently oversimplied nature of such broad global categories, there can be little arguing with the observation that English is a local language, not simply a foreign one, in the Malaysian context. While Bahasa Malaysia is the official national language, English plays a prominent role in public and private communication, particularly in urban centres, and is – in combination with other languages – an indispensable element of the linguistic repertoire of many Malaysians (see e.g. Albury, 2020; Coluzzi, 2017; Pillai & Ong, 2018). It is thus acquired not only through planned instruction but, to a significant extent, through exposure to authentic communication. This is a pattern of acquisition which is not characteristic of the 'English as a foreign language' ecology which acted as the primary point of reference for the developers of CEFR at the Council of Europe and for the Swiss language teachers whose perceptions were surveyed in the development of the CEFR reference levels (see above). While this disparity does not make CEFR unusable in the Malaysian context, it does point to the need for further thought on localizing the framework.

One area that such localization may focus on is the question of how to accommodate the presence of different Englishes in the language ecology of Malaysia, and indeed the importance of these Englishes in the language repertoires of Malaysians. An L2 user's contact with language variation is considered in CEFR, but only to a minimal extent, and once again from the perspective of 'foreign language' education, as learners are simply assumed to only have contact with the standard language until around C1, when users are, for instance, described as being able to understand an "unfamiliar" accent if they are able to "confirm occasional details" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 66). In such a framework, there is thus little accounting for a situation where users of English are very likely to come into contact with and acquire, to varying degrees, linguistic resources associated with a basilect ('Malaysian Colloquial English') and those of an acrolect ('Standard English'), as well as social conventions regarding how these resources may be deployed in particular social situations (Pillai & Ong, 2018). In contrast to a 'foreign language' environment, where use of the standard language in the classroom is targeted, it is the ability of an individual to flexibly adapt their use of Englishes to social context that may be considered as a standard of proficiency in Malaysia and in other ecologies with similar characteristics.

In order to foster competitiveness on the global stage, a key challenge for education in an outward-looking nation with as diverse a language ecology as Malaysia is how to harness the competences that individuals acquire through their socialization into the local society to achieve success outside that context. Acknowledging local diversity and making use of it is key, particularly because diversity is what globally mobile Malaysians are likely to encounter when, for instance, engaging in use of English as a lingua franca. As has been demonstrated by research on this phenomenon, success in intercultural communication in English among speakers who do not share the same first language is more likely if interlocutors cooperate to construct meaning, adapt their own language use, anticipate and address others' lack of understanding, etc. (Baker, 2017). Much of this rests on whether interlocutors are, on the one hand, aware of the diversity of Englishes in the modern world, and, on the other hand, willing to adapt themselves to others (ibid.). For contemporary English language education, a key challenge is thus how to develop speakers with an awareness of and a positive attitude toward different Englishes (Tupas, in press) and toward different cultures (Byram, 1997). The fact that Malaysian students, through growing up in a complex and diverse society, will hopefully already have had to opportunity to acquire such a positive disposition provides them with a significant competitive advantage over others. An approach to language education which finds a way to balance such local potential with global frameworks like CEFR is vital to achieving such a goal.

Outlook

In this article, I have examined the challenges and opportunities that CEFR, as a global framework, presents for local agency, focussing specifically on English language education in the Malaysian context. My main observation has been that CEFR has thus far been interpreted in a rigid way in Malaysian language policy texts, a reading which, while conforming to how the framework tends to be interpreted across the world, is at odds with its design and is thus unlikely to extract the maximum potential from it when it comes to local agency. Instead, I have argued that a more pro-active way of reading the framework would be advantageous, in particular given the many differences between the role of English in the language ecology in which CEFR was developed and that of Malaysia.

Such conceptual pro-activity may be transferred into concrete practices in different ways. In other contexts, it has involved the development of localized versions of CEFR, such as CEFR-J in Japan and FRELE-TH in Thailand, which have attempted to modify the descriptions in the framework. Up until now, these modifications have been rather minimal (largely involving the addition of more levels, e.g. A1.1, A1.2 and A1.3 in CEFR-J), but there is little to stop policymakers from reconceptualising some of the elements of CEFR to a larger extent. As future plans for a 'CEFR-M' are mentioned in *Roadmap*, there appears to be a window of opportunity to develop framework whose descriptions broadly stay within the spirit of those developed by the Council of Europe but also take greater account of the specific place English has in Malaysia.

There is also an urgent need to educate teachers about how they can best make use of CEFR, given that the scale of the framework can be quite overwhelming, despite the efforts of its developers to make it accessible. Teachers need to be taught how to decode the language of CEFR, how to make use of it for diagnostics and for objective-setting, and, most crucially, how to think beyond the partial descriptions of competence that CEFR offers and exercise their own agency when working

with the framework. By developing such 'CEFR literacy' at the grass-roots, a positive groundwork can be laid to facilitate future uses of a locally developed framework, thus enabling the kind of holistic, learner-centred reform of English language education sought after in Malaysia.

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Article

Teacher Agency Through Collaborative Expertise-building

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on teacher agentive acts in the process of collaborative expertise-building in selects tertiary institutions in Southeast Asia, this paper maps out the conceptual configurations of teacher agency. In doing so, it avoids both the overly deterministic and individualistic views of agency by locating it within structuring conditions where individual acts are also mobilized. However, while most socially constructive views of agency focus on situated and institutional constraints of agency, this paper conceptualizes teacher agency in its broadest possible sense as historical, cultural and ideological phenomenon, arguing that agentive acts cannot merely be seen as either working for or against educational reform and transformation; rather teachers must take control of the process of knowledge production because it is by doing so that teachers can take ownership over their everyday classroom tactics and practices. Teacher agency in this sense is not simply a *capacity* to act but, in fact, an *accomplishment* of acts of producing knowledge for one's professional practice.

KEYWORDS: teacher agency, materials writing, curriculum development, Southeast Asia, expertise

Introduction

In a teacher capability-building project in curriculum development and materials design which I co-facilitated in Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines, one of the most conflicted and intriguing dimensions in the generation of 'capability' among teachers is teacher agency. In its broadest sense, teacher agency refers to one's power to "make free or independent choices, to engage in autonomous actions, and to exercise judgment in the interests of others and oneself" (Campbell, 2012, p. 183). As practitioners engaged in the daily messiness of the classroom, we appear to make decisions which we call our own, and this could be facilitated by particular professional beliefs which make agentive practice possible (Biesta et al., 2015). On the other hand,

we also casually narrate daily challenges in the way we exercise teacher agency because – sometimes meant half-jokingly – we say that it really depends on whether or not our principal or school administrator is observing our class or within hearing distance from our classroom. In a sense, this tells us that what we do in the classroom is not totally our own making even if we sometimes think our decisions are totally our own.

Teacher agency: Taking control of structure of knowledge production

In this paper, I conceptualize teacher agency in its broadest possible sense as historical, cultural and ideological phenomenon. I do so by narrating and describing a collaborative expertise-building project among English language teachers in select tertiary institutions in Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines during which they – through collaborative acts -- gradually took control of the production of knowledge in curriculum development. This means that I aim to address two major pitfalls in the theorization of agency that has confounded the literature thus far: "an over-socialised, macro view of agency" and "overly individualised notions of agency" (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 194). This objective to address the intriguing and slippery link between individual acts and structural conditions is nothing new. However, while such work does indeed surface the socially-mediated nature of teacher agency, the common trajectories are immediate or situated social conditions which impact or shape professional development and/or practice of teachers (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020; Tao & Gao, 2017; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Wagner et al. (2019), for example, rightly define teacher agency "framed by structures that include those that are physical or embodied, such as classroom resources or the physical spaces of schools, and generalizable procedures, such as curricular guidelines or demands driven by assessments" (p. 400). This paper expands the notion of 'structures' to encompass broad cultural and historical conditions which shape teacher agency. Thus, teacher agency refers to active projects of intervention in the production of knowledge which is embedded within historical, socioeconomic and political conditions of coloniality and neoliberalism such that what is important is not so much the facilitation or the resistance to school reform or curriculum change, but rather the teachers' being able to take control of the process of the knowledge production itself through teaching and curriculum development.

In the research literature, there has been the tendency in some work to treat teacher agency as if it exists apart from the structure within which we operate as teachers (Calhoun, 2002). This structure is difficult to pin down, but it does include institutional constraints (such as the simple but concrete example above, but also policies which work against what we want and hope to accomplish in the classroom) which also implicate ideologies which help construct and manage such constraints in the first place. However, it also involves conditions beyond formal institutional boundaries such as national policies within which are embedded ideologies and practices of capitalist globalization, as well as global coloniality. They are hidden yet pervasive conditions which impact our work as teachers.

In other words, it is not just the bodies and power of school authorities which shape classroom practice. Histories, cultures and ideologies speak through and shape all aspects of our professional lives as teachers even if we seem to be acting on our own away from the prying eyes of our immediate institutions and institutional leaders. It may be that critical professional discourses and educational philosophies are necessary for teachers to develop "repertoires for manoeuvre" in the

classroom (Priestly et al., 2012, p. 211), but this paper extends teacher agency beyond discursive considerations such as beliefs and educational philosophies by framing it within structuring historical and cultural conditions. It acknowledges that by and large there is "lack of conceptual clarity about the nature and purpose of teacher agency and change" (Pantić, 2015, 760), thus this paper aims to discuss the concept squarely in terms of taking control of the structure of knowledge production in our profession hopefully to help work towards greater clarification of the concept.

In this paper, however, I also expound how teacher agency is engaged in "necessary pedagogical tactics" (Campbell, 2012, p. 187) except that it is a profoundly historical, cultural and ideological phenomenon. In other words, while this paper moves away from purely psychological conceptions of teacher agency where teachers are invested with the capacity to act freely without social constraints (Calhoun, 2002), it also does not subscribe to an overdeterminist perspective which renders teachers as "pawns" of the system (Lasky, 2005, p. 900). Teachers as agentive professionals are invested with individual capacities to act on conditions largely beyond our control. This conception of agency draws fundamentally on Butler's (1997) theorization of agency which locates it within conditions which are larger than individual acts but upon which such acts make their unique imprint:

> That agency is implicated in subordination is not a sign of a fatal self-contradiction at the core of the subject and, hence, further proof of its pernicious or obsolete character. But neither does it restore a pristine notion of the subject, derived from some classical liberal-humanist formulation, whose agency is always only opposed to power. The first view characterizes politically sanctimonious forms of fatalism; the second, naïve forms of political optimism. I hope to steer clear of both these alternatives (p. 17).

Thus, following Butler, this paper questions the use of 'teacher agency' as a way to deny or gloss over the centrality of structuring conditions which continue to shape our lives such as the coloniality of our professional practice and its embeddedness in neoliberal networks of ideologies, power and relations. This is what Butler describes above as naïve political optimism. In some scholarly quarters, the rhetorical line goes something like this: 'linguistic imperialism is a thing of the past. You see, we have evidence of teachers resisting it.' Similarly, the role of neoliberal ideas and practices in shaping classroom practice is glossed over or de-highlighted because teachers, the argument continues, have defied policies or transformed disempowering classroom practices. This paper argues that the presence of teacher resistance, defiance and power does not negate the pervasiveness of structural conditions because teachers as agents are "embedded in their contextual conditions, yet capable of transforming these conditions" (Pantić, 2015, p. 760). In the case of this paper, these contextual conditions are not simply immediately situated conditions but are, in fact, thoroughly historical, cultural and ideological conditions.

In other words, teacher agency is the power to act on and transform conditions which shape one's practice but the act of doing so is mobilized within – not outside – these conditions as well. It is a dynamic interplay of empower(ed) acts within disempowering conditions. This view, again following Butler, is neither fatalist (the structure is completely disempowering) nor naïve (individuals can exercise agency without the influence of structuring conditions).

One way to operationalize teacher agency in the sense above is when teachers are able to take control of the structure of knowledge production in their field. In this paper, I will do so by narrating and describing my experience leading a capability-building project in materials design in Southeast Asia for teachers in higher institutions in Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam and the Philippines where we worked on collaboratively developing our 'expertise' in writing materials in professional communication and English learning. Additionally, quotes from individual participants will also be included as appropriate. These statements come from regular reflections sought from them which were included in the quarterly reports submitted to the funding organization (see below). At the start of the project, all participants signed an agreement to allow these reflections and the materials they would produce to be used in written academic outputs.

The three-year project (conducted between 2009-2012) and funded by the Temasek Foundation Singapore aimed to help teachers develop their own materials in order to make these materials more appropriate for their own contexts of teaching and learning (see Tupas, 2014; 2020; 2021). The process was suffused with historical, cultural and ideological constraints because the structure of knowledge production in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Southeast Asia is to a large extent not conducive to producing locally-made materials if we are to listen to teachers themselves talk about their insecurities about writing their own materials. This paper tracks ways by which teachers gradually took control of the production of materials by reorienting knowledge production towards the needs of their students and classrooms and proceeded from there to construct relevant knowledge upon which would be built the materials they would produce in the end (see Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Kuchah, 2013). I have written about this project through the lens of the politics of knowledge production (Tupas, 2020; 2014) and the politics of localization (Tupas, 2021), but in this paper the focus is unpacking the nature of teacher agency. As mentioned earlier, I define it as *conditioned* (but not completely controlled) individual acts of resistance and intervention in the practice of the profession.

The Politically and Culturally Conditioned Nature of Teacher Agency

At any given time in the duration of the project, there were around 80 tertiary English teacher participants. The project was grounded in an understanding of use of materials in English and professional communication classrooms as culturally and politically problematic because textbooks and similar teaching resources are by and large produced by writers and scholars who are unfamiliar with the cultural nuances and diversity of hugely multilingual classrooms in Southeast Asia. Kumaravadivelu (2006) asserts that "textbook preparation and production remain a centrally controlled, globally targeted activity with very little role for local ELT professionals" (2006, p. 20), and still remains so up to this day (Al Hosni, 2015; Kazemi et al. 2017). Conceptually, we may refer to these 'foreign' materials as constitutive of the politics and ideologies of 'the global coursebook' (Gray, 2002), which is produced in traditional centers of knowledge production in the business of teaching and learning of English such as the United States and the United Kingdom and which generally espouses the cultural values of these centers and thus markets particular language teaching methods and language standards as universally applicable. In other words, the global coursebook to a large extent imposes particular worldviews, practices and teaching methodologies which do not align with the cultural sensitivities, institutional demands and learner needs of local ELT practice.

One crucial way to address the cultural imperialism of the entire ELT global industry is to develop ways of generating knowledge about our local classrooms from which would emerge potentially relevant teaching and learning materials. Ideally, this would require 'expertise' in writing locally-produced materials but, as will be described later, such expertise needed to emerge from engaging in projects of empowerment through collaborative work. But how does one start if the teachers themselves do not feel confident to write their own materials? As one teacher from Vietnam admitted early on: 'I don't know how to write the materials so I just get from the book' (Pham)[1]. ELT expertise in the region (and similar ELT contexts) is by and large defined in terms of what the teachers are not – 'native speakers', 'textbook producers' and 'knowledgeable of latest methodologies' (Llurda, 2016; Kumaravadivelu, 1994). Teachers in the region are essentially consumers of textbooks, and their classrooms laboratories for testing theories and language teaching methods developed in (Western) centers of knowledge and knowledge production (Chowdhury & Le Ha, 2008).

Consequently, one of the key principles of the project was its commitment to expertise-building as a collaborative and grounded endeavour. However, this proved to be a great challenge: we needed to convince the stakeholders – from the funders to the teachers – that there would be no 'experts' in the project in the sense of individuals and institutions that are institutionally legitimized as knowledgeable in the field and thus invested with authority and power to 'educate' or 'train' other teachers in the rest of the world. In the uneven field of knowledge exchange and flow, the 'experts' of ELT are deemed to be those coming from centers of knowledge production such as the United States and the United Kingdom who theorize and develop methodologies from their own specific cultural contexts of teaching and learning. Coming from what Kachru (1986) refers to as inner circle countries, thus imbued with professional identities associated with white privilege and native speakership, these 'experts' travel the rest of the 'non-native English' world and preach about the 'best' practices in ELT. In recent years, 'localization' has become a buzzword (Tupas, 2021), thus making the introduction of 'new' theories and language teaching methodologies more culturally and ideologically palatable, because it essentially means "presenting a global product in different local flavors" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 15). Yet by and large the nature of knowledge and skills being 'shared' is one that is fundamentally associated with particularized or provincialized cultural sensibilities and experiences only made 'universal' by institutions of power which control the production of knowledge in the field of ELT. In this geopolitics of knowledge production, the teachers in the project (and teachers of English in the region in general) are positioned as consumers – rather than producers – of knowledge. One of the realizations put forward by some of the teachers in the project had to do with the fact that they could actually write materials in the first place. One of the Indonesian teachers put it clearly -- 'I realize that all of us can actually put materials for our students' (Santi) – which in some contexts may sound surprising because it should be self-evident that teachers write materials for their own classrooms, but it is certainly not in other cultural and institutional contexts where 'good' knowledge is produced elsewhere.

Thus, in an earlier article (Tupas, 2020), I narrated how our project, especially at the initial stages, was confronted repeatedly by questions about expertise. On the side of the funders, we needed to

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

respond to queries about who was going to lead the project if we[2], the co-Directors, would not take on the role of 'experts'. On the part of the teachers during the first few rounds of institutions, we were asked a similar question: 'Who is the expert here?'. But the spirit of the project fundamentally revolved around this question of expertise: we would collaboratively work together to become 'expert' teachers who could write our own materials in ways that were not only culturally appropriate but, more importantly, in ways that would help us take control of the production of knowledge in the writing of materials itself. Without taking ownership over the process of producing knowledge in the field (Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Pennycook & Makoni, 2019), it would be difficult to consider our everyday acts of teaching and learning as potentially agentive in nature. To what extent should we consider our practices 'resistive' if we remained ideologically committed to being consumers, rather than producers, of knowledge? One of the key ideological constraints in teachers taking on the role of producers of knowledge – and, by implication, as theory-builders rather than recipients or users of theory – is their belief that as 'non-native' speakers of English, they are automatically disqualified from becoming 'experts' in writing materials for the teaching and learning of English (Llurda, 2016; Tupas, 2020). The most crucial question therefore was – and this would be the subject of the paper – how could we take control of the materials writing process and, along the way, build our expertise in the area? This paper builds on the answer to this question in order to unpack the complexity of the conditioned but productive nature of teacher agency.

Teacher Agency through Expertise-building

The disavowal of 'traditional' experts does not mean we did not involve scholars from within and outside the region who are well-known for their work in curriculum development and related fields. In fact, all participants in the project early on were given the opportunity to meet in Singapore for a workshop conducted by these well-respected scholars in the field. However, we were conscious of the fact that:

> Teacher training, and more acutely, ELT materials writing have often been in the hands of NSs, who at the same time have also exerted control on professional practices such as the establishment of teaching goals, approaches and methodologies, and models of language use across the profession (Llurda, 2016, p. 51).

Desiring Unpredictability as an Agentive Act

Thus, instead of working with participants to educate or train them for the latest theories and methods in language teaching and, more specifically, in the writing of ELT materials, we asked the teachers to help us unpack the process of materials design, for example by unravelling unexamined assumptions that underpin such a process. Thus, we critically examined the cultural and ideological assumptions of globalized testing competencies framework and explored the possibility of an ASEAN[3] framework of language teaching and professional communication competences, an undertaking that proved to be too ideal as different institutions and countries in

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[2] I worked with a former colleague at the National University of Singapore, Lee Kooi Cheng, who was the lead co-Director of the project.
[3] Association of Southeast Asian Nations

the region were deploying similar terms such as 'basic proficiency' and 'advanced English language skills' with radically different assumptions given the different levels of depth and range of English language use in the region. In the workshop, we also focused on sharpening our understanding and skills in needs analysis for the purpose of identifying problems of teaching and learning specific to institutions and countries. Thus, instead of identifying theories and approaches that we could use to frame the writing of our materials – for example, should it be task-based (Liu et al. 2018), communicative (Rahman & Pandian, 2018), language awareness-raising (Lo, 2019), grammar-oriented (Almuhammadi, 2020), or an eclectic framework (Sato & Oyanedel, 2019)? Or should it be a World Englishes- (Sadeghpour & Sharifian, 2019) or English as a Lingua Franca-aware (Biricik Deniz et al., 2020) approach? – we sought to develop a 'grounded' problem-driven framework of curriculum development. This would be a process of writing materials and developing curricula generated by and from culturally and institutionally specific problems in language teaching and learning. Another Indonesian teacher describes the process quite succinctly based on his own experience: 'we started the project from the ground. We went to some industries and schools to investigate what our students need…' (Edu).

Consequently, the first and crucial agentive step in materials design is to de-privilege dominant and popular frameworks and, instead, develop a rigorous problems and needs analysis approach to materials writing. What are the language teaching and learning problems of students and teachers, and how best could these be addressed by materials writing? This meant that participants would require critical analytical skills in figuring out potentially eclectic solutions to these needs and problems, making their work a grounded approach to writing materials (c.f. Kuchah, 2013; Kumaravadivelu, 1994) and – this needs to be emphasized – *unpredictable*. The specific tracks of the process unfolded as it proceeded organically precisely because the teachers needed to map out their strategies and solutions in the light of emerging (and sometimes changing) 'new' knowledge both from their own needs analysis endeavours and from their interactions with other teachers in the project. In hindsight, many teachers found figuring out the process one of the highlights of the project, as claimed by another Indonesian participant: 'What I value most about the project is "the process" to achieve good accountable work' (Mila).

The unpredictability of the process is not a disadvantage. In fact, it should be deemed a critical aspect of the process of materials writing since it proves that the writing responds to situated ecological and cultural demands of the context of teaching and learning. As an agentive tactic in our professional practice as teachers, we need to embrace the uncertainty or messiness of the process as we aim to disengage from the power of 'experts' and map alternative pathways towards collaborative expertise-building:

> Uncertainty is a name for fora of collective learning. It is an intimidating prospects – to experiment, to let go, to try to unlearn habits of thought and practice – but whatever the limits it might place on responsible learning, it also, for us at least, promises an exciting and new set of possibilities (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010, p. 120).

Listening actively as an agentive act

What is important to emphasize in our specific blueprint of problem-focused needs analysis is the agentive act of active listening (Whitney et al., 2002; Elisha-Primo et al., 2015). The teachers

shared – and this should not be unfamiliar to teachers in similar spaces of the geopolitics of knowledge – that teacher training programs in the region would include well-funded workshops and seminars featuring 'experts' flown in a day before the activity and would usually leave the place immediately after their lectures were done. The goal mainly was to introduce the 'newest' and 'best' practices in the field, even if decades-old research has shown that such modes of teacher training were barely effective since what teachers would have learned could not be applied when they returned to their own classrooms and institutions (Cruz Arcila, 2018; Hu, 2002; Chowdhury & Le Ha, 2008). Alternatively, needs analysis needed to be seen not simply as a process of accumulating information but, more importantly, as an opportunity to *actively listen* to multiple – even conflicting -- voices inside and outside the classroom, develop ways to systematically map out what has been learned by listening, and respond to these learnings in the form of localized elucidation and solutions to problems and needs of the specific contexts of teaching and learning.

Consequently, teachers needed to listen not only to students, co-teachers, and administrators, but also to industry players who had specific knowledge and skills sets in mind for their own respective workplaces. Thus, industry players in banking, call centres, IT, and tourism (among a few others), were invited to speak with teachers in several occasions throughout the duration of the project. Similarly, active listening in the project also involved interacting with – and thus, learning from -- fellow participants as they too had actively listened to stakeholders in their own cultural and institutional contexts. The structure of collaborative expertise-building in the project, thus, needed to account for intercultural communication and exchange as teachers shared findings from their own needs analyses and conducted workshops for each other. This meant institutional sharing and 'listening' visits *within* and *across* countries involved in the project. In other words, groups of teachers from different institutions within the same country met several times (for example, in Hanoi or Can Tho in Vietnam) to listen to and learn from each other and, in later stages, critique each other materials. Several teachers – especially those with exemplary findings or materials -- were invited to visit other countries for similar sharing and listening workshops for fellow participants. Thus, teachers from Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam visited Iloilo City in the Philippines to meet and work with all participants in the Philippines. This would be replicated in other countries as well. If we assume that dialogues are always intercultural in nature -- race, gender, class, age, linguistic affiliation, and so on, are cultural attributes that impact the shape and content of communication (Nakayama & Halualani, 2010) -- then listening to each other who come from different institutions and countries is central to expertise-building and, for that matter, teacher agency:

Ultimately, the very real danger posed by cultural power must be countered by the willingness of actors to listen receptively to each other, in order to understand other perspectives before criticizing them. Such receptive listening assumes that participants believe that they have something to learn from each other, which in turn presupposes the openness and trust that enable intercultural dialogue in the first place (James, 1999, p. 598).

What this showed was that, while teachers needed to respond to specific demands of teaching and learning, 'localised' solutions did not mean myopic solutions. There is a need to listen to each other because a 'local' outlook must be grounded in the material realities of teaching and learning which may also be shared by others in other contexts of teaching and learning. This would be the cultural genesis of collaborative expertise-building, where becoming 'experts' is generated

through listening to what we referred to above as complex and conflicted voices of those with stakes in teaching and learning, and those with whom teachers share similar experiences and material realities. Thus, active listening serves as an agentive strategy of teachers in dealing with the massively conditioned nature of their work as materials writers and, more broadly, curriculum developers.

Finding spaces of transformation as an agentive act

In today's globalized world, where 'multicultural' and 'diverse' are used to help describe it, it is nevertheless important to note that in interactions between people in intra-national and transnational contexts "little or no emphasis is placed on listening in general, let alone on intercultural listening" (Beall, 2010, p. 226). Thus, active listening as described above should be embedded in lifelong collaborative expertise-building. In other words, it should not happen only when teachers attend workshops or training sessions. When the teacher respondents in the project returned to their respective classrooms, they revised their materials and tested them with their students and their colleagues for the purpose of receiving more feedback to sharpen the effectiveness of the materials. In the process, however, this commitment to listening to different, even conflicted, voices for the purpose of teacher self-improvement and further classroom effectiveness has accomplished far more profound impact on the teachers: a greater awareness of their power as teachers to initiate change in and outside the classroom. They have gradually taken ownership over their own choices (see examples below), not even only in the writing of materials for their own use, but in all other aspects of their teaching as well. At the start of the project, one of the key questions tackled during the first workshop for all teacher participants was about the nature of 'capability-building' for the purpose of collaborative expertise-building: 'Who decides?' As the project progressed, especially as the teachers drew confidence from listening to and learning from each other, it has become increasingly clear to everyone that teachers should be the key decision-makers in the classroom. This goes with a caveat, of course: that decision-making involved taking ownership over the production of knowledge in the field. This meant the generation of knowledge about the specific needs of students, teachers and institutions which, we have seen, has been due to the teachers' collaborative work through active listening and the embrace of unpredictability in the process.

One clear example can be gleaned through a comment by one of the teachers from Vietnam who, after the post-writing workshop (one of the last activities of the project), wrote this succinct but profoundly relevant feedback: 'We thank KC and Ruanni [co-Project Directors) for all the feedback [during this specific workshop] but we know what is the local context so we should come together more often as a team' (Ha). The teacher here signalled that while feedback from us was appreciated, they had better understanding of the local context, and that the way forward was to continue to collaboratively work with fellow teachers to produce their own materials. There is much to unpack from this statement, but what we see here relevant to our paper is the teacher's self-awareness of her right to control the production of knowledge for the purpose of writing materials for her own institutional and cultural context. There is, nevertheless, still an acknowledgement of the need to continue the conversation and listen to each other, thus the need to 'come together more often as a team.'

Consequently, for teachers in the project, the greatest challenge now was how to locate their new-found agency within the limits of their own institutional and cultural contexts. That is, teacher agency does not simply mean awareness of one's capacity to control the structure of knowledge production, for example in materials writing, because this will result in what we have described above as idealized but naïve understanding of one's nuanced positionality vis-à-vis cultural, political and socioeconomic conditions which limit, shape and/or control one's practice of profession. Teacher agency, in fact, inscribes in itself a self-awareness of the existence of these conditions within which one's capacity to act on the world operates. I describe some of these tensions between structure and agency in earlier work on the project (Tupas, 2020; 2021), but also on general theoretical dialogues on the topic (Tupas, 2004; 2010), but the common point with conceptualizing these tensions as constitutive of teacher agency itself is that it actually allows teachers to find spaces of transformation or change amidst conditions of unfreedom. In other words, an awareness of one's capacity to act -- *and* limited capacity to act -- on the world opens up opportunities to earnestly look for concrete spaces to initiate reforms and change in one's own context.

An 'extreme' case during the project was the experience of one institution in Vietnam (Tupas, 2021). Having taken control over the production of their materials for students, they nevertheless realistically needed to navigate the institutional demands for the use of particular kinds of textbooks. It was clear, according to them, that there was no room for materials they produced on their own to find their way into the classroom because the ministry had its own specifications for what textbooks should be used in the light of its blanket endorsement of the Common European Framework (CEFR) (see Van Huy et al., 2016). Through dialogues between themselves, they actually found a rather utterly simple way to take these materials into the classroom without violating any institutional requirement: to introduce them as 'supplementary' materials. This way, without labelling them as required reading, the teachers worked within institutional limits but still found a space for reform in terms of providing teachers and students a broader range of content and, by implication, more culturally appropriate materials, in the English language classroom. The teachers' emerging understanding of themselves as experts in materials writing opened up spaces for them to explore ways to introduce new materials in the classroom despite their earlier misconception that educational policies are irreversible and cannot be outmanoeuvred politically and ideologically.

Another context to discuss the complex dynamics of teacher agency is the experience of one institution in the Philippines (Tupas, 2021), although it was of a radically different nature. This institution was a politically committed institution with a strong liberal arts foundation. Thus, the teachers in the project were broadly opposed to a 'market-driven' understanding of materials design (see Musa et al., 2012). Having undertaken similar listening exercises described above, the picture they needed to confront was one that saw most of their graduates going into the call center industry. Teacher agency could be gleaned through how the teachers themselves knew they could control the production of materials in ways that would take a unique shape never seen in the institution before: materials that would surface specific work-related language needs but worked out within a syllabus that allowed teachers and students to unpack the problematic nature of such market-driven needs in the first place. In a sense, the teachers wanted to teach their students the skills necessary for the workplace but also sought to let the student gain a critically-aware understanding of the skills as fleeting – indeed, these are what the market needs 'at the moment'

(Musa et al., 2012) – as opposed to more 'universal' skills such as critical thinking (Zakaria, 2015). Similar to the Vietnamese case above, this was a case of teachers exploring reforms in the curriculum within conditions that hugely help determine the shape of such reforms. These examples operationalize the workings of teacher agency which we have repeatedly described not only as one's empowered capacity to act on the world within which are conditions which shape such an act but, more importantly as an *accomplishment* of acts of taking control of producing knowledge for one's professional practice.

Conclusion

"In language education," according to Van Huy et al. (2016), "there is a growing interest from many state-nations to borrow global policies and dump them into their local contexts for implementation" (p. 79). In the context of this paper, I hope to have shown how this politics of knowledge production operationalizes the unequal production of knowledge in materials design in Southeast Asia. This structural configuration of materials design serves as the broad conditioning framework for teachers' agentive acts. While Van Huy et al. (2016) refer to conflicted individual responses to top-down policy impositions and, by extension, broad political, cultural and socioeconomic conditions of unfreedom, as "internal struggles" (p. 80) of teachers to make sense of the various roles they play in their institutions, in this paper I re-frame these struggles as constitutive of the conflicted nature of teacher agency itself. That is, what teachers experience as struggles from within could actually be the operationalization of teacher agency: the individual teacher takes on the structure in order to make changes but such changes work within conditions generated by the structure itself. In this sense, teacher agency is generative or productive: it is conscious of its limits while it pushes these limits to carve out new spaces for "transforming the situations of exclusion and underachievement of some learners" (Pantić, 2015, p. 760).

This conception of teacher agency does not fall into the trap of characterizing teachers as perpetually bound within conditions of unfreedom without any possibility of transcending these conditions themselves. In fact, although extremely difficult under these times of capitalist and neoliberal globalization, breaking down the structure and the conditions that it generates is always a possibility except that one cannot naively believe that it can be done by stepping outside these overpowering conditions. This is not possible as the school itself is an institution of power imbricated within conditions and discourses of global coloniality and neoliberal globalization (Escobar, 2004). This means that educational institutions have been constantly pressured to reinvent themselves as exemplars of neoliberal ideals (Olssen & Peters, 2005) – for example, institutions as generators of knowledge capitalism as they train students to become workers *for* capital, business and industries, with emphasis on performativity and the need for greater surveillance and assessment of teachers' work.

For Olssen & Peters (2005), 'education wars' best describe the struggle of educational systems today, but it is a "struggle not only over the meaning and value of knowledge both internationally and locally, but also over the public means of knowledge production" (p. 340). This paper has argued that such a struggle – among English language educators at least – necessitates teachers' control of the structure of knowledge production in the writing of materials. Teacher agency

emerges from this kind of struggle and makes teaching a persistently hopeful endeavour despite the overwhelming power of political, cultural and socioeconomic forces beyond our control.

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Article

Every Teacher a Changemaker: Reflections on Teacher Agency and Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore teacher agency through the notion of teacher as changemaker by drawing upon our experiences in both school and university contexts. The purpose of this article is twofold. First, we present a personal account of our combined professional experiences of over half a century with how agency is exercised and achieved in our classroom and beyond. This consists of a series of reflections from the classes we have taught and individual students we have mentored, to our response to research and curriculum development. In these reflections, wherever relevant, we highlight what informs our decision-making and motivates our action from merely 'getting our job done' to a more humanistic engagement with teaching, mentoring and other professional activities. Second, we evaluate our earlier discussion against the backdrop of the notion of teacher as changemaker. We conclude by highlighting that teachers as changemakers are individuals concerned with personal transformation and growth, that they are committed to empowering others' lives, and that they enable others to be changemakers.

KEYWORDS: Teacher as Changemaker; teacher agency; transformation; empowering others; ecojustice; affirmation

Introduction

This article was initially inspired by a few Facebook posts the first author received in the period of 6-8 May 2020 during the first (and rather depressing) Movement Control Order period in Malaysia. These posts were from some students who the author had taught at a secondary school about 15 years ago. One of the posts is reproduced as follows, with consent given by the former student:

Figure 1: A Facebook post

The post reads: did EVERYONE have an English teacher that changed their life? (rather cheekily prefaced by 'If you didn't, I feel bad for you'). We believe that readers of this Journal would readily agree that receiving news from a former student often gives rise to pleasant feelings; the thought of being remembered is always a joy. What is much more professionally satisfying is when we receive a message of gratitude which suggests we have, apparently, 'changed their life'.

It is this notion of teacher as changemaker that we wish to explore in this article for the 50th anniversary issue of *The English Teacher* on teacher agency. This we do mainly through our reflections on over half a century of combined professional experiences to highlight how agency is exercised and achieved in the classroom and beyond, while making reference to some key works in the field. The reflections take the form of narratives from both the authors. As McAdams (2008, pp. 242-243) shares:

> Stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in the social contexts of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, and culture at large.

The stories shared here are in the social context of our workplace, that is, at school and the university. This includes the classes we have taught and individual students we have mentored, to our involvement in research and curriculum development.

This article is organized as follows. First, we briefly review the literature on teacher agency. Then we present a series of reflections, highlighting wherever relevant what informs our decision-making and motivates our action from merely 'getting our job done' to a more humanistic engagement with teaching, mentoring and other professional activities. Finally, we evaluate our earlier narratives to discuss the nature and value of the conception of teacher as changemaker.

Literature Review

The Notion of Agency and Changemaker

Agency has become a buzz word in education in recent years. To be an agent or to be agentive is, in the words of Bandura (2001, p. 1), to "intentionally make things happen by one's actions". In the field of general education, scholars have talked about teachers as agents of change or agents of curricular and pedagogical reform (e.g., Heikkinen et al., 1992, Fullan, 1993; Leander & Osborne, 2008; Priestley et al., 2012). In language education, agency has caught the attention of teacher educators and applied linguists such as Mercer (2011) and Larsen-Freeman (2019) who focus on learner agency.

In the context of *teacher* agency, Vähäsantanen (2013, p. 14) suggests that "[a]lthough the theoretical discussion surrounding agency has been extensive…, there has not been much empirical research on agency within the field of education, and particularly not on professional agency". To address this concern, she investigated the individual professional agency of 16 Finnish teachers in the context of changing work practices. In her study, professional agency was examined via three complementary manifestations, that is: (i) influencing and negotiating the conditions of one's work; (ii) taking a position towards educational reform and engaging in the reform; and (iii) transforming and sustaining one's professional identity. Based on the findings, Vähäsantanen proposes that "interactional couplings between different actors and levels in the organizations" would be the best management style to nurture meaningful work places that support an individual's well-being, commitment, sustainability and social transformation.

Teacher agency has further been discussed by Priestley et al. (2012) and Biesta et al. (2015), who remind us about the importance of an ecological understanding of this concept. Agency, for these scholars, is not something that teachers can have either as a property, capacity or competence, but

it is something that teachers do in relation to context and time. Further informed by the scholarship of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), Biesta et al. (2015, p. 627) point out that:

> … the achievement of agency is always informed by past experience, including personal and professional biographies; that it is orientated towards the future, both with regard to more short-term and more long-term perspectives; and that it is enacted in the here-and-now, where such enactment is influenced by what we refer to as cultural, material and structural resources.

In this article, we use the term 'changemaker' to denote what teachers can do and achieve, and discuss why this notion matters. It is important to note that empirical research into the notion of teacher as changemaker is still very limited. One preliminary study into this area is by Rivers et al. (2015a), who sought the feedback from 30 university staff members on how university teachers can be conceptualized as changemakers (see also Rivers et al., 2015b). The findings from this survey point to five (sometimes overlapping) conceptions which, we believe, are generalizable to other educational contexts with some adjustments:

Conception 1: Changemaker as institutional strategy, in which visionary leaders are developed and strategic organisational thinkers are nurtured;

Conception 2: Changemaker as critical thinking, perspective shifting and problem solving, in which teachers would first develop all these skills themselves before they could support the growth of students to evaluate evidence within a given context (critical thinking), to look at situations from multiple angles (perspective shifting), and to find solutions to problems (problem solving);

Conception 3: Changemaker as enhancing employability, in which helping and supporting students to align themselves with industry for the purposes of gaining employment is crucial;

Conception 4: Changemaker as social betterment, in which making a positive change to a social situation is important; and

Conception 5: Changemaker as personal transformation, in which changing one's personal trajectory, taking control of one's life and developing as an individual are emphasized.

Relating this to our earlier discussion, we see that being empowered with professional agency (Vähäsantanen, 2013) would create space for teachers to become visionary leaders and strategic organizational thinkers (Conception 1). This would be made possible by teachers upskilling themselves (Conception 2) and progressively undergoing personal transformation (Conception 5) in order to bring about social betterment (Conception 4). All these conceptions are largely supported by another exploratory study in the context of primary school education. The study was conducted by Van der Heijden et. al. (2015) who investigated what they refer to as characteristics of teachers as change agents. They interviewed a group of 20 individuals comprising teachers, principals and external experts, and identified the following personal traits of change agents: (i) life-long learning (an eagerness for gathering information and systematically reflecting on their teaching practice); (ii) mastery (possess skill and knowledge with effective teaching strategies,

believe in their students' abilities and are adept at motivating students to be inspired learners; (iii) entrepreneurship (making decisions and taking risks responsibly and motivating colleagues in the process of change); and (iv) collaboration (being collegial).

The next section will first present a personal account of our professional experiences in relation to teaching, mentoring and other professional activities before we revisit the notion of teacher as changemaker. We acknowledge the fact that our notion of changemaker is by no means comparable to that envisioned in the masterpiece of Drayton (2006), who first initiated and popularized the concept of changemaker in social entrepreneurship. We hope, however, that the discussions and reflections in this article will encourage brainstorming and inspire sharing of work, division of labour and other forms of collaboration, so that our skills and energy can be channeled into creating something more meaningful and positive together.

Reflections

Vanie (1987-2021)

I started my teaching career as a tutor in 1987. I had always aspired to be a teacher; I had taught tuition to primary and lower secondary students in my neighbourhood since I was 16. Seeing my students improve in their studies was inspiring for me as a young girl. I was always patient with slow learners and they stuck with me because I would not give up easily on them. I therefore completed a Diploma in Education (with a major in TESL and minor in Physical Education) in 1986 soon after graduating with a Bachelor in English Literature in 1985. As the two-year offer to tutor came with a requirement to do a Master in English Literature, I took up the offer without a second thought. I was very passionate about English Literature and knew that completing my Master degree would open up many avenues for advancement in my teaching profession. I took the steps to equip myself for a more productive teaching career from the start and continued these initiatives throughout my teaching years, as do most educators, by attending training workshops and other career development activities which were relevant to my teaching context. As noted earlier, Bandura (2001, p. 1) states that "to be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one's actions". In other words, an agent of change has to be an avid life-long learner, as pointed out by Van der Heijden et al. (2015) in their study on the personal characteristics of change agents.

From my tutor years (1987-1989) till 2004, I was solely involved in teaching various English proficiency courses to different faculties at the university and literary stylistics to students of the English department at my own faculty. 2005, however, brought a big change to the path I was going to take in the subsequent years of my teaching life. It was the year the expansion of my horizon from TESL and English Literature to Translation Studies began. It was really by sheer coincidence that sometime in 1997, I was asked to translate two short stories from Malay to English by a colleague for an anthology of short stories. I was almost instantly lovestruck by the art of

translating as I set to work on the stories. There were so many linguistic and cultural aspects to consider but the challenge was positively tempting that my appetite for translating grew to a point where I wanted to gather knowledge about the translation activity and be formally trained to teach translation. Another huge factor that drove me to want to be an expert in translation was the lack of staff at the faculty who had the expertise to teach translation courses. So, in 2004, I decided that if I am pursuing a PhD, it would be in Translation Studies. This was a big leap for me; I only have three languages under my belt, English, Malay and Tamil. I am proficient in written and spoken English and Malay but I can only speak fluently in informal Tamil while my reading and writing in my mother tongue is most elementary. My desire to learn more about translation however, overtook any concern for how little I had in terms of my language range. I took a risk and launched into a field I knew little about. I realize today that changemakers need to take risks because 16 years down the road, I have no regrets but only a growing love for how translation opens up new worlds of knowledge, builds bridges across cultures and helps facilitate all forms of global transactions.

The entrepreneurial attribute of a changemaker relates to the risk that must be taken responsibly (Van der Heijden et. al., 2015). From the start, I took responsible steps to establish myself well in an unfamiliar field. I took every opportunity to audit postgraduate classes in Translation Studies while at Monash University, Australia; I participated in translation seminars, workshops and conferences and networked with others working in translation. I did not pass any opportunity to find out more because I was eager to come home from Monash University to share all that I had learnt. When I returned to the faculty in 2009, I was only too happy to be asked to teach in the undergraduate Minor in Translation Programme offered by the Department of Applied Linguistics and Malaysian Languages. This is the twelfth year of my involvement with the programme and five batches of students have graduated from my classes and there are so many good stories to tell of the positive changes that took place in the students' lives and mine. One positive change was their scope for employability was broadened because they had not just improved in their linguistic knowledge and confidence in using three languages (Malay, English and Chinese/Tamil) but had the opportunity to take on translation projects and tasks as freelance work apart from their other full-time jobs. In their final year, I sent the students out to make contact with professional translators whom they had to interview to find out as much as they could about the language service industry and to make links with potential employers. The students gained a lot from this exercise and were always thankful that they were exposed to the translation market and were made aware of the expectations of working in the translation industry. This relates to Conception 3 (Rivers et. al., 2015) where teachers as changemakers help create greater opportunities for students to align themselves with the relevant industries.

The decision I had made in the direction of Translation Studies has today led to relatively more serious attention paid to this niche area which was once marginalized at the faculty. As I come close to my retirement, I have had the honour of motivating other younger colleagues to take on a PhD in Translation Studies so that the expertise in this field is made more robust at the faculty; the present team of translation lecturers is markedly small while the demand for postgraduate studies in translation is plenty. Presently, with the help of the translation team, 2 MOUs have been signed and another is underway for collaborations with a university with a vibrant translation culture, with

PPM (*Persatuan Penterjemah Malaysia*/Malaysian Translators Association) and with an industry to enhance teaching, learning and research in Translation Studies as well as employability. The journey has been slow and long one and the work to promote Translation Studies faced some very rough patches especially in the earlier years when other fields were given more priority and the lobby for Translation Studies was not adequately supported. The push factor has been supportive deans in more recent days and the collective agency of a close-knitted translation team that has worked hard not to lose heart but to persevere by building solidarity with translation scholars outside the faculty particularly by making links with PPM to host/co-host yearly translation seminars and conferences and network with established international and local scholars in the field. Today, talks are in the pipeline to offer a Master programme in Translation Studies. We have come a long way since 2005. For me, it is a deep desire come true to see Translation Studies given its rightful place. This is pertinent change that will benefit many students and staff of the language faculty in the years to come.

I have talked at length about how risk when taken responsibly can bring about lasting change in the long run and especially when it is coupled with support from top management (Vähäsantanen, 2013) perseverance, good teamwork and a desire driven by diligence to see better days. And, now, I will recount two specific stories out of countless stories that warm my heart because of the positive change I saw in some my students.

The first story goes back to the early 1990s when I was teaching a class of Arts Faculty students who could hardly utter a sentence in English. These students sometimes repeated a level up to three times before they could move on to the next level. They had to complete 3 levels of English proficiency to graduate. Armed with a few years of teaching experience by then, I would patiently motivate the students and laboriously run through the teaching points with them as they did their practice. As a young teacher, I remember being told not to teach English via another language. But, seeing how strained my students felt, I had to make my own decision as to what teaching method would solve the challenge my students were facing. This is what Rivers et.al. (2015) refer to as Conception 2 where the teacher brings about change by enacting a shift in perspective to solve a problem. On reflection, if I had not adopted a bilingual method of teaching, I would have been perpetually met with a wall of silent diffidence from the students who saw English as a completely 'alien' language and one they could never master. The decision to use the students' mother tongue to teach, in addition to English, put the students at ease over time. What at first seemed like defiant silence broke and the students began to slowly respond and participate in classroom learning.

When the last few students had finally cleared all the proficiency levels, it was a day of triumphant joy for them and most certainly, for me. As we said our farewells and took a class photo, I vividly remember the words of one of the female students, who came up quietly to me and said: "If I ever become a teacher, I want to be just like you." For me, that is the highest praise a teacher can get and it reminds me that one of our vital tasks as changemakers is to inspire our students with good qualities we have modelled to them. The best change we want to see in our students is that they become good human beings. The student was referring to my patience, kindness and perseverance with them; I had never once said anything discouraging despite seeing the same faces in my classes repeatedly over many semesters. I had become their friend and on my early morning walks around

the campus, I would see the grinning faces and waving hands of some of these students trying to catch my attention as they passed me by on their motorbikes. These are, I believe, stories that so many teachers would be able to likewise share about how their students have appreciated them for the countless moments of kindness, consideration and understanding shown. I believe that when we build a healthy camaraderie with our students through an unflinching and compassionate commitment to their learning process, we instil a trust in the education system and humanity and this is kernel of all forms of positive change.

My second and final story here involves an international student I had the opportunity to teach English Literature to in 2010. This international student whom I shall refer to as Shaun (not his real name) was an overconfident young man, who expected a lot from others but gave the bare minimum in terms of paying attention in class or completing group assignments. He was the talk of the department for missing classes or assessments and clearly seemed doomed to fail. It was easy to become irritated with his attitude but I made a conscious effort to never show any annoyance; my better judgement told me that if I rebuked him harshly, I would have completely switched off any vestige of interest left in him for my course or learning in general. I would always remind myself of the larger picture (e.g., what would come of him in the years ahead, what were the sacrifices his parents might have made to get him across the seas to provide him a good education etc.). These important questions gave me the strength to be patient with him; I wanted him to know that he was as important to me as any other student in the class so I expressed words of encouragement each time he turned up for class, even if late, and for the slightest effort he made in answering a question, however poor the answer was.

Shaun failed the literature paper twice and on the third try, he finally scraped through with the minimum C pass grade. He never stopped coming to my classes; I believe that the conscious efforts that I had made in not singling him out in class with a harsh or sarcastic remark gave him the confidence that I respected him just like I did the rest of his more conscientious classmates. I believe that "teaching is ultimately a class act of human compassion" (Vandeyar, 2017, p. 373) and human compassion is a promising currency for positive change (see also Chau & Kerry, 2008).

When Shaun knew that he had cleared his Literature examination, he came by my room with a huge box of chocolates and thanked me. It took me by complete surprise because he was not the kind to express gratitude openly but his gesture that day confirmed that I had brought a change in him. It took much patience to keep up my spirits with Shaun but, the effort to endure this difficult student paid off when he finally graduated. Today he works in a global research enterprise, an achievement that puts a smile on my face.

In the course of my more than 30 years of teaching, there have been many more instances where I have had the humble mission of championing the cause of students who were weak and struggling. As I believed in them and showed my constant support, they pushed through and eventually completed whatever they had set out to do under my supervision. Possessing mastery (Van der Heijden et. al., 2015) does not stop at having the latest knowledge and know-how in the disciplines we teach but also developing the endurance to run the race till we see personal transformation for ourselves and our students set in motion.

Meng Huat (1998-2021)

I started teaching in 1998 by giving private tuition classes to 5-15 students during weekends in a small village in Johor. It was a place where one could listen to the birds in the morning and the crickets at night. That was where I lived too. I had a short stint of six months teaching at a nearby primary school in 2001 after graduating with a degree in TESL. The decision to become a teacher took place on the final day of my SPM (the Malaysian Certificate of Education, equivalent to the *British* GCSE) examination, and my graduation in TESL therefore meant a dream come true.

My initial training and education at university taught me to use English (or to be more precise, 'proper English') as the sole language when teaching English. My secondary school experience of learning and studying English in the classroom further reinforced that belief that speaking English to teach English is the most effective (and desirable) way of promoting English language learning. With this background and experience, when I was offered the opportunity to teach as a replacement teacher at the primary school in the village (where most of the pupils were using and speaking Mandarin (Chinese) as their mother tongue in the classroom and at school), I requested that I only speak English to the pupils in the class. This was, surprisingly, granted by the understanding headmaster of the school. I used the word 'surprising' as the year was 2002, a time when Chinese-speaking primary schools were often inclined to use their mother tongue to teach all subjects, including English.

I was asked to teach English to the exam class, the Primary 6 pupils (about 12 years of age), who were to sit for the UPSR (Primary School Achievement Test) by the end of the year. In addition, I taught English to all the classes of Primary 3 and 4. In all my lessons with these primary pupils, from 9-12 years of age (most of whom spoke limited English and probably found this new, English-speaking teacher amusing), I only spoke English. This was no easy teaching, to say the least, with a great deal of patience required. Creative ways of delivering the classroom lessons were called for, too. The English-only teaching practice attracted mixed responses from the school, with one extreme case from a senior teacher of the school who commented: The kids don't even understand English. How could they possibly learn anything from him?!

I persevered, however, because that was how I was 'trained', which in turn became my belief at that time. When the results of the UPSR were announced in December that year, I was congratulated on having 20% of the Primary 6 pupils scoring an A in the English subject, an apparent record in the academic performance of the village school since its establishment a few decades ago. Opinions changed thereafter at the school about what 'worked' in English language teaching. I also believe that the faith the school headmaster had in me deserves equal credit for the results achieved.

I continued offering private tuition classes in 2002-2004, and had a short stint teaching at Universiti Sains Malaysia and working as a research officer on an ELT project at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. In 2005, I took up a full-time teaching job at MRSM (or MARA Junior Science College), where I was responsible for teaching secondary school students who were predominantly speaking Malay as their mother tongue. It was a fully residential school. Although these were 'selected'

students who were doing particularly well in science and mathematics subjects, many were in general still very weak as far as English language proficiency was concerned. Interestingly though (and perhaps unsurprisingly too), they were expected to score an A in the English subject, not just a pass.

Again, I only spoke English to the students. In 2006, I was entrusted to be the coordinator of the English language subject for all the Form 3 students. These are usually referred to as the 'exam classes', who were to sit for a public examination known as PMR or Lower Secondary Assessment by the end of the year. The pressure of teaching them was of course extremely high. There were five classes in total at this school, and I was teaching three of them, with the remaining two taught by my colleague. Needless to say, the preparation for the examination was my main focus, in addition to my teaching of other classes and coaching other students for inter-school competitions. Three months before the public examination, there were night classes for the Form 3 students in this residential school. As a teacher and the coordinator for this group of students, each time the students completed a mock test or examination and had their individual results, I would near literally experience a heart attack, with different degrees of severity. How could I possibly help them all not merely pass, but score an A for their English? Any teacher teaching in a similar context and having a similar expectation thrust on them would understand this feeling.

On reflection, the whole year was a real race, with a series of ongoing teaching and extra-curricular activities taking place one after another. But sometimes the dynamics of a race must be examined within a broader perspective. In the case of the Form 3 students, I loved the way how each of the students became increasingly motivated to study over time. They gave their best so that they could do better in the next mock test. Indeed it was a strong fight they put up, representing an admirable collective agency. When the PMR results were announced at the end of the year, this junior college ranked the second-best junior college in the English language subject performance among all the MARA junior science colleges in the country. Except for two students who scored a B for their English, the remaining 88 students in the three classes I taught all scored an A. (Full disclosure: The Facebook post was from a student in one of these classes, and she is now working as a geologist.) The following year, I was awarded a state-level Excellent Service Award.

Was everything smooth sailing in my professional journey? Not really. In 2006, for example, I was given the unnerving responsibility of coaching students for inter-school choral speaking competitions. I knew next to nothing about choral speaking and was least cut out for a creative activity of this sort. However, I had no choice but to tread this unfamiliar ground. I learned later that coaching a choral speaking team was about guiding 33-35 students to speak and perform with minimal movement, using various voice combinations and contrasts to bring out the meaning or tonal beauty of a text or script. No mentor or colleague at the school had experience sharing how to coach a choral speaking team. The school had never won a prize in this competition. It was then a trial-and-error experience. The students were enthusiastic though in taking part, thinking that the teacher was the expert and would guide them well(!). It was a long process of training and practice, to get all students to speak in a harmonious unison, with several practice sessions lasting till midnight. In the first year, the results of the inter-school competition on choral speaking were quite encouraging: we emerged second in the southern zone, one of the four zones of the nation. In the second year, we won the second prize at the national level. In the third year, we brought home the

title, champion of the national choral speaking competition, having outshined all the MARA junior science colleges. All of these, to an outsider, might have looked like easy achievements but they certainly were not. Deep down I knew I must first learn about what choral speaking involves. It was a long three-year process of self-learning and development. It was also a prized collaboration with the participating students who showed commitment in terms of time and energy. I must further add that the school management was also in full support of all our practice sessions. The African proverb '*It takes* a *village to raise a child*' probably captures the essence of this collective effort.

During my four-five years of teaching and service at this school, I also had the privilege of initiating and working on several projects. One was organizing and chairing a national conference for school teachers and university lecturers with the theme on quality education. Another was in the national MRSM committee for the PMR and SPM trial examination papers. A third one, which deserves more discussion space here, was in a three-year national committee to develop a new curriculum and relevant materials for the English language subject. This was to be adopted and implemented in stages in all the MARA junior science colleges in the country. The primary goal of this new curriculum, as envisioned by the Director of the Secondary Education Division of MARA, was to enable all the students in junior science colleges to speak English confidently. It took the committee some time to brainstorm ways on how the goal might be achieved. Eventually, through several intense meetings, the committee, guided by the Director, decided that there would be no homework for the first-year students joining the junior science college. This idea was a breakthrough at that time, as most (if not all) schools, particularly the junior colleges, were very much oriented towards giving homework, thinking that 'practice makes perfect'. Further, the new curriculum required that there be no written work during or after the English lessons and that all the lessons be based on in-house developed reading materials; there were only oral or speaking tasks in and outside the classroom. All this signified a real innovative curriculum reform. It was mentioned that this curriculum, with its eventual success, inspired the development of a similar programme by the Ministry of Education some years later.

As the only member of the curriculum committee who was into vocabulary and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, I was entrusted with the responsibility that there was vocabulary control in the reading materials, all written and developed by the members of the committee. That is, in the first semester of their secondary school life, students would be exposed to reading materials that were within the first 500-1,000 high frequency words in English. The second semester, they would gradually be exposed to materials containing the second 1,000 high frequency words. These words are considered to be the most useful vocabulary for beginning learners of English (Nation, 2003) and would constitute or approximate what Krashen (1985) calls 'comprehensible input' that is necessary for successful language learning. What personally excited me most about this national curriculum innovation project was the opportunity to apply what I had learnt about SLA and vocabulary research in real-life meaningful practice of materials design and curriculum development. Professionally, I found it most encouraging that research efforts by committed applied linguists such as Paul Nation could be translated into practice to serve students more effectively and efficiently. This is to a large extent reflective of the ecological perspective on agency as postulated by Priestley et al. (2012) and Biesta et al. (2015).

The final story I would like to share is from my last 10 years of experience at Universiti Malaya. Working at a research university, as we all know, means one needs to do research, and write and publish. I was initially not so much into writing and publishing when I joined this university. This was a stark contrast to my time as a school teacher till 2009: I published an edited volume with Bloomsbury, then known as Continuum, with contributors such as Howard Gardner (well known for his theory of multiple intelligences), after organizing the conference on education mentioned earlier as a secondary school teacher. Before that, I also published some journal articles and book chapters. What motivated me to start actively writing and publishing again was largely due to an encounter with a PhD student, Li.

Li comes from China, from a most humble financial background. He worked really hard to save enough money before he left his country and came to Malaysia in February 2017 to begin his PhD research journey. During one of the first supervision sessions, Li shared an important piece of information with me about the current trend in higher education in China: if before graduation, a student has to his or her name a good number of articles published in high impact journals (particularly those indexed in Web of Science), the student could secure a promising academic position upon graduation.

Li's sharing brought back memories about the original intention that took hold of me on that final day of my SPM examination: to become a teacher that can serve and support others. I therefore appreciated Li's sharing of the information, and saw academic writing and publishing as an opportunity for people like Li to break free from a humble background. This motivated me to work hard alongside Li to write and publish together, first based on his PhD research and later on other research projects we initiated together. We often worked till late nights, and there was one occasion where we worked at my office from the evening till the next morning in order to complete a revised manuscript based on the reviewers' comments and suggestions. The hard work paid off eventually. Within three years of his candidature, Li had a few articles published in good journals in Web of Science and received a few job offers before his graduation. What was equally satisfying, for both Li and myself, was that Li graduated with a Distinction for his PhD. He is presently a full-time faculty member of a respectable university in language studies in his home country, also ready to transform and serve as a changemaker (see below). Needless to say, I have been most pleased about all this, and at the same time I have become increasingly involved in research, writing, mentoring and publishing.

Discussion

Every Teacher a Changemaker

In the beginning of this article, we briefly reviewed some key aspects of agency and the notion of teacher as changemaker. Do we see ourselves as having been changemakers? Yes, to some extent, however small the ripples of change we may have brought about to ourselves, our colleagues, our students and the institutions we have served. There are no doubt a few episodes narrated in this article that we truly feel proud about. Vanie, for example, openly encouraged and patiently guided the young man, who was initially "the talk of the department for missing classes or assessments"

and seemed to be "doomed to fail". This appreciative student who came bearing a gift of chocolates for his teacher eventually graduated and is now having a well-paid job. Meng Huat, on the other hand, had the opportunity to work with Li, publish articles together and see him start off his career in a good academic position. Independently, both of us have received various gestures of appreciation from our students, including such expressions as "If I ever become a teacher, I want to be just like you" and the Facebook post shown earlier in the introduction of this article. While we have these little trophies to encourage us, we would also like to acknowledge the fact that bringing about change is a continuum, a never-ending process; so, despite the years of experience behind us, we are both still learning and travelling along this road that has much more to teach us about the positive changes we can bring about to ourselves and to those who will cross our paths within and without the teaching fraternity.

The notion of teacher as changemaker tends to suggest that teachers always 'know' that what they are doing is right or best for their students. This is certainly not true, at least not with Meng Huat. For example, Meng Huat started off believing that the best way to teach English is to exclusively use English, and no other languages, in the classroom. He indeed practised what he believed in, and achieved some modest success at both the primary and secondary schools he taught, as narrated above. But on reflection, that past practice was reinforcing a monolingual native-speaker ideology, which values only monolingualism but ignores multilingual realities of students' lives. Since this realization around 2011, he has adjusted his practices and started promoting a multilingual or Global Englishes approach, which is more inclusive than the English-only practice. In the postgraduate SLA course he is currently teaching at Universiti Malaya, for example, he would often share with his students how equally guilty he was with some other teachers in championing the English-only policy in his class during his younger days as a primary or secondary school teacher. In fact, he has now devised the syllabus for the postgraduate course in such a way that there are at least five weeks of lessons devoted to challenging the dominant monolingual native-speaker ideology, with two specific weeks considering the benefits of translanguaging or languaculturing (Tham, Chau & Thang, 2020) for the classroom where multilingualism or the Global Englishes perspective is acknowledged, embraced and celebrated. This he does too in his guest lectures as a visiting professor at another university. He now encourages all his students, some of whom are already teachers or lecturers and others who are planning to join the profession, to explore language learning and language use from a multilingual or Global Englishes perspective for social justice purposes. In doing so, he hopes that students are empowered to become changemakers themselves by addressing issues of native-speakerism, linguicism and the monolingual bias in their research, classroom and society at large. In other words, teachers as changemakers might still 'fail' or make mistakes, but they are always ready and willing to change and empower themselves and others. They always aspire to a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017).

In this sense, we would argue that every teacher can become a changemaker, and we believe many already are.

It goes without saying that the path to change is not always a smooth one. The three hurdles to change that we can share here are related to time, collegial support and workload. Some changes as with Vanie's efforts to establishing the importance of Translation Studies in the faculty came to fruition only after a number of years and when the newer management gave their increased support.

We must also note that multiple simultaneous activities (like curriculum review, marking, audits, conferences, collaborative events etc.) during certain seasons of the teaching term or semester tend to increase our workload and cause a stretch on our energy. In times like these, it is not always possible to enact the changes we wish to in all quarters of our influence. The teaching fraternity is a busy beehive and we both have been completely overwhelmed at times that our best intentions for our students were not always fulfilled. There were students we would have liked to talk to on a one-to-one basis to help them through their particular learning problems or social/emotional challenges, but time did not permit these sessions and we could only motivate the class collectively from time to time.

Having said that, we believe that we are but two members of this chain of many other dedicated fellow teachers in our faculty who are also moulding the lives of our students. Lukacs (2015, p. 40) refers to this as "collaborative expertise" where teachers are able to work together for good practice in their schools. It is collective agency that supplements, complements and strengthens the changes we hope to bring in our own and our students' perspectives towards learning, personal growth and interhuman relationship.

One point which we have not really discussed in this article, but which is necessary to highlight, is the need to ask ourselves questions on the larger purpose of education when we are considering the notion of teacher as changemaker. Nieto (2010) has this to share with us: (1) to provide all students of all backgrounds the opportunity to learn through an equitable and high quality education; and (2) to help students to become critical and productive members of our society. To us, these two primary goals of education should inform all the activities we have in relation to teaching, mentoring, writing, research and other professional involvements. At the moment, we are actively engaging and collaborating with our students and colleagues to critically reflect on and collectively challenge the limitations of a monolingual native-speaker or standard language ideology that is currently dominant in our classroom and society. In tandem with this, we also champion more inclusive and just practices that affirm and celebrate multilingualism and Global Englishes (see, e.g., Man & Chau, 2019; Man et al., 2021; Smidt et al, 2021), and extend these practices in the wider world to nurture and cultivate a greater respect for our fellow animals (Chau & Jacobs, 2021). With this larger purpose of education in mind, the changemaking process, we believe, becomes particularly meaningful.

Considering all the discussions and reflections above on what makes a changemaker, we suggest that firstly changemakers are individuals concerned with personal transformation (for the benefit of personal and professional growth) and secondly they have the interests of others at heart (i.e., they are committed to empowering others' lives). Change always starts from within oneself (see also Jacobs & Chau, 2020). In our context, the teacher in the classroom, who might be considered 'the captain' of the class, is someone who takes initiatives to grow as a person and an expert in order to model positive values, beliefs and practices which, in turn, may inspire those in their circle of influence to bring collective changes. That essentially leads us to considering a third quality of teachers as changemakers: to enable others to become changemakers (cf. Drayton, 2006). The inclusive approach we have mentioned above, on collectively and collaboratively challenging a monolingual native-speaker ideology, promoting the ethical spirit of multilingualism and Global Englishes, and fostering more respect for our fellow animals for ecojustice purposes, is one

example of how we would like to see more people getting involved in transforming social and environmental practices in potentially profound ways.

Conclusion

In this article, we suggest that teachers as changemakers consider both the immediate situation and the larger context or bigger picture of education and life. Personal qualities such as patience, perseverance and affirmation with students of diverse backgrounds and practices are to be nurtured. Teachers who are changemakers believe in all students even when some of them do not believe in themselves. Teachers as changemakers constantly reflect upon what they are doing for themselves and their students' self-development and assess all their decisions and actions in relation to their environment with a purpose for growth for all concerned. It is also important to point out that changemaking is work in progress and is often complimented and activated by collaborative efforts of different individuals with different capabilities and strengths, involving students, colleagues and other people around us.

An article of this length admittedly prevents a more thorough discussion of the topic. We have not, for example, acknowledged how we have striven to emulate in our own lives the kindness, fairness, support and passion for teaching that our favourite school teachers, university lecturers and colleagues have modelled to us. Neither have we considered the indelible positive impact they leave on our lives, an impact we aspire to pass down to others, all of which signifies an ecological perspective of agency. We hope, however, that we have made clear that teachers as changemakers are individuals concerned with personal transformation and growth, that they are committed to empowering others' lives, and that they enable others to be changemakers. In a conscious effort to serve ourselves, to empower people around us, and to enable others to do the same, every teacher is a changemaker.

Acknowledgements

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Article

The Autonomous Thinking Teacher: Preparing English Teachers for the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

This concept paper describes the changes made to Singapore's initial teacher preparation (ITP) programmes with a specific focus on its thinking teacher model (NIE, 2009) – a model of teacher agency and an approach to ITP that requires self-reflection on roles and practice, understanding theories and research, and adapting to changing learner needs (Tan & Liu, 2015). An important component of this model is a 'meta' course which all pre-service teachers are required to undergo. This 'meta' course called Professional Practice and Inquiry (PPI) initiative – which was introduced to develop reflective professionals – cuts through the entire ITP programme providing them with both a framework and a platform to curate their understandings across all their courses, reflect deeply about teaching and learning and highlight their best work. This paper demonstrates, by the use of vignettes from their reflective pieces, how the goals and various components made possible by the PPI initiative provided the impetus for English pre-service teachers to develop into autonomous thinking teachers.

KEYWORDS: initial teacher preparation, teacher autonomy, professional practice and inquiry, reflective practice

Introduction

"To meet the expectations they now face, teachers need a new kind of preparation – one that enables them to go beyond "covering the curriculum" to actually enable learning for students who learn in very different ways." (Bransford, Darling-Hammond & LePage, 2005)

This epigraph cuts to the very essence of every education system that is committed to preparing learners for the 21st century; and the teachers who will teach these exact same learners in an ever-changing environment. The "new kind of preparation" that Bransford et al (2005) suggest, requires a considerable shift in mind-set alongside the embracing of a brand-new set of dispositions pertaining to teacher learning and agency. Singapore reached this crossroads a decade ago.

This concept paper will describe the changes made to Singapore's initial teacher preparation (ITP) programmes with a specific focus on its thinking teacher model (NIE, 2009) – a model of teacher agency and an approach to ITP that requires self-reflection on roles and practice, understanding theories and research, and adapting to changing learner needs (Tan & Liu, 2015). It will explicate features of a 'meta' course – called the Professional Practice and Inquiry (PPI) initiative – which all pre-service teachers undergo. PPI has become an important feature of the ITP programmes and it was introduced with the purpose of developing reflective professionals. It provides student teachers with both a framework and a platform to curate their understandings across all their courses, reflect deeply about teaching and learning and highlight their best work.

Adopting an 'ecological' approach to agency espoused by Priestley, Biesta & Robinson (2013) – i.e., where teacher agents will "always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment" (p. 3) – this paper will also demonstrate, with the use of vignettes from their reflective pieces, how the structures and environment set up through the PPI initiative form powerful enablers for pre-service teachers to develop into autonomous thinking teachers. While this initiative affects all pre-service teachers (from Arts and Humanities to Science and Physical Education), this paper will focus only on the reflective pieces of the student teachers preparing to teach English. As the number of reflective pieces discussed is small, we would like to put a caveat to this at the outset that there will be limitations to the claims that are made in the discussion section.

The Professional Practice and Inquiry (PPI) initiative

Background

Subscribing to the principle that "agency is associated with individuals who, alone or in groups, in a given situation, make decisions, take initiatives, act proactively rather than reactively, and deliberately strive and function to reach a certain end" (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020, p. 2), the PPI initiative was introduced to develop autonomous thinking teachers – individuals who are self-motivated to take the initiative to improve their practice. Autonomous thinking teachers are aware of their teacher identity, embody the professional stance of inquiry and constantly seek to innovate

their teaching so that it best nurtures the learning of students. These individuals keep abreast of the evolving educational landscape through reflection and systematic thinking (Koh & Liu, 2015; Liu, Koh & Chua, 2017; Tan & Liu 2014).

To achieve this aim, the PPI initiative – which undergirds all courses including the teaching practicum – was conceptualised to be the "glue" of the ITP at NIE (Liu et al., 2017).   The Autonomous Thinking Teacher model below, illustrates the tight integration and coherence of the various ITP courses as well as how the connections between courses and practice gel together through the PPI initiative.
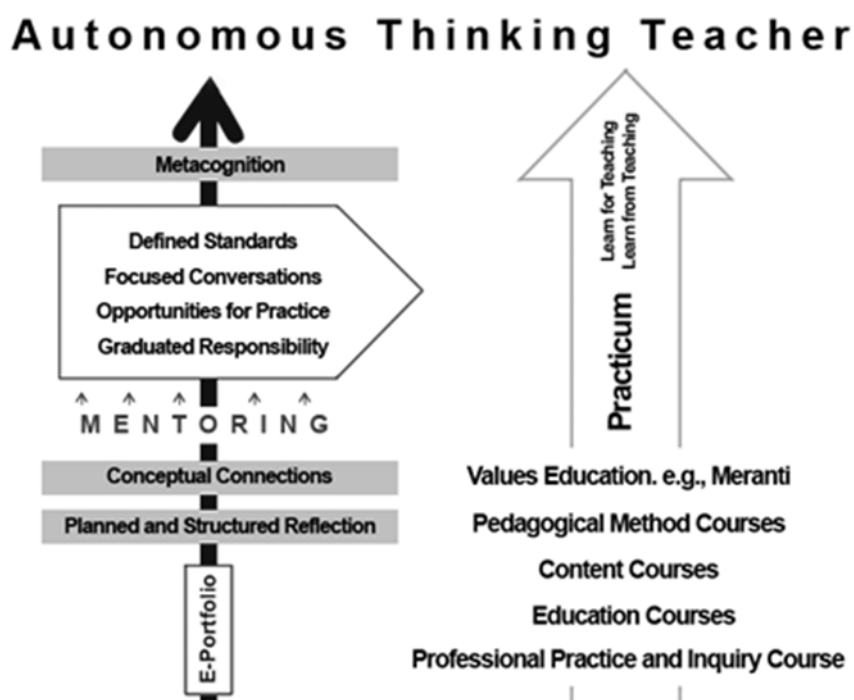
Figure 1. Autonomous Thinking Teacher Model (from Tan & Liu, 2015)

The PPI initiative which is an enabler for NIE's thinking teacher model aims to develop teacher *professionalism* with a strong ownership of growth in professional *practice* right at the start of the ITP. Student teachers are prepared for the complexities of teaching, understand what it means to be in the teaching profession and are able to use their knowledge bases to translate them into pedagogical practices in their classroom. Since its inaugural conceptualisation and implementation in 2010, the PPI course has gained acceptance and recognition and has been made a core Educational Studies course implemented across all ITP programmes at NIE. The PPI initiative comprises 2 components: The PPI course and the Digital Portfolio.

The PPI course

The PPI course is a meta-course that seeks to develop teachers with a clear teaching identity, who are able to reflect upon their mission as educators, inquire and reflect upon their own practices, draw upon theories and research to design innovative pedagogies, translate these into practice, and improve the learning outcomes of their students. More specifically, the PPI course aims to develop student teachers who are able to:

1. Formulate and articulate their own teaching philosophy
2. Share their conceptions of teaching and learning
3. Integrate and aggregate their learning across the different courses and practicum
4. Articulate the connection between theory and practice
5. Articulate their teaching and learning using their personal digital portfolio; and
6. Understand the importance of inquiry and reflective practice.

The course covers topics like: Understanding the "why", "what", and "how" of PPI, reflecting upon and crafting one's teaching philosophy; understanding and applying the Reflective Practice Model to their own practice; understanding and engaging in the process of Teacher Inquiry and correspondingly using data, theories and research in this process of inquiry. Three main themes run through the PPI course: reflection, inquiry and identity.

Reflecting on one's own perceptions, beliefs, experiences and practices is a central activity for teachers (Sellars, 2012). Through engaging in the process of reflection, student teachers gain insights into their assumptions and are challenged to refine their thinking about matters pertaining to teaching and learning (Calandra, Gurvitch, & Lund, 2008; Schön, 1987). As student teachers engage in reflection, they can look back on events, evaluate, and alter teaching practices in light of new learning experiences, theory and research. This improves their professional practice and deepens their knowledge of selves (Sellars, 2012; Valli, 1997). Unreflective teachers on the other hand, are merely skilled technicians who are limited in their ability to make good decisions or alter their actions (Valli, 1997). In the PPI course, the Reflective Practice Model provides a systematic framework to guide student teachers through the process of reflecting in, on, and for action (Langer, Colton & Goff, 2003; York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere & Montie, 2006) so that they can gain deeper insights into ways for enhancing their own practice.

But beyond reflection which can be invisible, ad hoc and unsystematic, student teachers are encouraged to engage in a systematic process of reflection that is based on evidence. Using the Professional Inquiry Model, student teachers learn both *from* and *for* teaching. They are taught to engage in an intentional, visible and continuous cycle of data-driven, evidence-based inquiry, action, improvement, positive change and reform (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008; Liu et al., 2017). If learning to teach is fundamentally inquiry-based in nature, then learning needs to involve a continuous process of systematic refinement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Dunne, 1993).

A teacher's identity is a personal construct that indicates how one sees oneself as a teacher and how one feels as a teacher (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Gee, 2001; Mayer, 1999). Teacher identity is a dynamic construct and is understood to be in a continual flux and construction (Mayer, 1999;

Walkington, 2005). An awareness of one's personhood during initial teacher preparation provides an understanding of current self and practices. This forms the foundation for areas of growth and professional development (Krzywacki, 2009; Walkington, 2005).

The Digital Portfolio

Complementing the PPI course is the NIE Digital Portfolio which students begin to construct as part of the course. The digital portfolio is a platform which allows student teachers to build a conceptual map of their learning and teaching at NIE and chart their growth and development. It is used as a tool to facilitate the articulation of their teaching beliefs and philosophy, share their conception of what teaching and learning entails, and make visible their inquiry into their own practice. It serves as a cognitive framework that allows the student teachers to form connections between the various courses undertaken at NIE. This process of forming connections will serve to synthesise and aggregate their learning and strengthen the theory-practice connection.

The digital portfolio at NIE is defined as "an electronic collection of authentic and diverse evidence of a student teacher's learning and achievements over time, on which he/she has reflected and designed for personal development, as well as for presentation to audiences for specific purposes." It is referred to as the "Learning and Teaching Portfolio" to highlight the continuum in its purpose to chart the development of a student teacher at NIE, his/her induction as a beginning teacher, and his/her eventual professional development as a skillful (or trained) teacher (Liu et al., 2017).

The digital portfolio allows student teachers to curate artefacts that reflect their teacher personhood and demonstrate the range of teaching competencies they acquired. The digital portfolio is a tool for reflection on their philosophy of teaching as well as student teachers' attainment of standards and competencies. In the processes of reflection and inquiry, the digital portfolio acts as a tool that allows student teachers to document inquiry processes and generate evidence that the student teachers are becoming thoughtful and reflective teaching professionals (Shepherd & Hannafin, 2011; Smits et al., 2005).

Through the PPI course and the digital portfolio, student teachers articulate their teaching philosophy and engage in a process of self-authorship as they crystallize their teacher identity. At the same time, student teachers develop the professional stance of reflection and inquiry into their professional practice. They raise issues about their teaching and learning, use relevant literature, data and experience to inform and transform their teaching practices. Pivotal to this inquiry process is that inquiring educators continue to share their findings, implementations and experiences and elicit feedback to further refine their practices (Chua, Lee & Liu, 2018). This fosters a culture of inquiry among student teachers who are empowered to take ownership of their learning and development (Weshah, 2013).
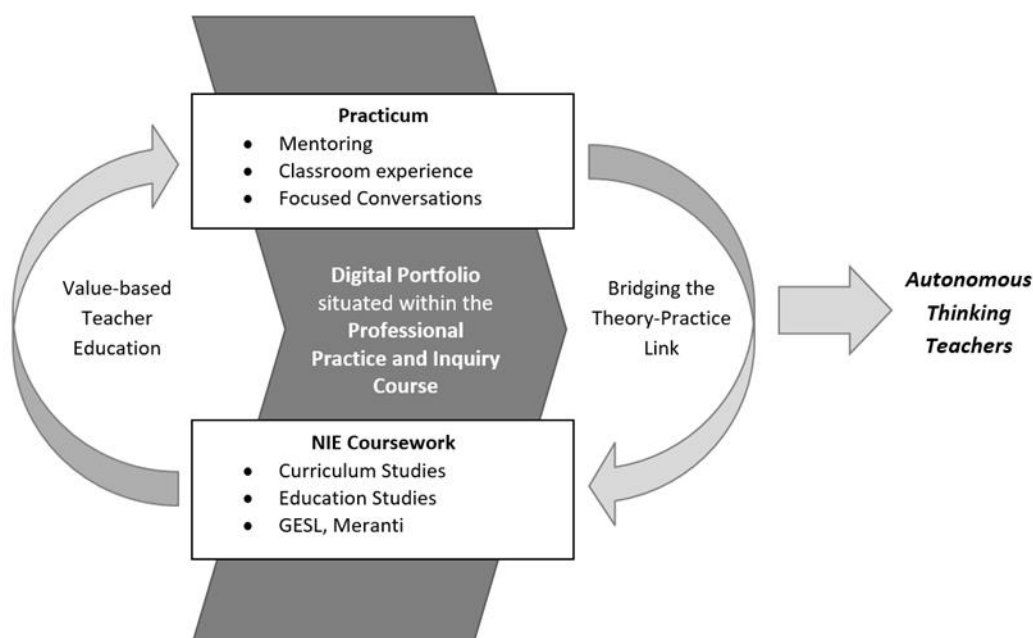
Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of the PPI course (adapted from Liu et al., 2017)

From the start of the PPI course, student teachers are asked to reflect on topics such as their teaching beliefs, their conception of teaching and learning and their role as educators. During the PPI course, student teachers are taught how to craft their teaching philosophy using the digital portfolio, one that will guide the formation of their future perceptions and beliefs for the different facets of teaching. The use of the digital portfolio further supports student teachers' growth and ability for self-reflection, providing a context for ongoing discussions about the construction and negotiation of teacher identity (Hallman, 2007). This visibility of thoughts and inquiry process within a community of practice is an essential element in facilitating student teachers' crystallisation of their teacher identity and inquiry into their professional practice.

Both the PPI course and digital portfolio form part of the teaching practicum. Student teachers are tasked to articulate their teaching philosophies, share learning and teaching experiences, share how they inquired into their teaching during practicum with the use of artefacts and the portfolios. The goal is to develop autonomous thinking teachers through a professional culture of reflection, inquiry, learning and sharing. Combining both theory and practice is an important aspect of teachers' professional development (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss & Shapley, 2007). The theory that student teachers learn through courses helps them to "learn for practice" and the practicum experience helps them "learn from practice" (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The practice makes up the "how" while the theory forms the "what" and "why" supporting the "how". This helps teachers cope with the complex challenges in the classroom and be more effective in implementing changes (Timperley, 2008; Yoon et al., 2007).

Planned and structured reflections from the NIE courses facilitate student teachers' understanding and application of the body of theoretical knowledge from the courses and helps them connect their learning in NIE across the various courses by building their own conceptual map of teaching

and learning with the help of the digital portfolio as they prepare for their practice in schools. During their practicum stint, student teachers inquire into their classroom practices and develop their teaching competencies through 3 planned Focused Conversations spread out through their ten weeks of their practicum experience. Throughout this period of time, mentorship by the teacher mentors in school and the NIE faculty supervisor for practicum play a vital role in helping student teachers crystallise their teacher identity and develop into reflective practitioners who are able to think about their own learning and learn about their own teaching. Throughout this journey, student teachers' thought and learning process is made visible to themselves, their peers, school personnel and NIE faculty via the digital portfolio. The development of the disposition for reflective practice and teacher inquiry is urgent and crucial at the start of their preservice teacher preparation programme (Saad & BouJaoude, 2012). And in the spirit of personal and professional growth, it was a deliberate decision that these portfolios were not assessed.

In addition to the focused conversations which allow the student teachers to articulate, share and reflect on their teaching philosophy and practices, local and global platforms and opportunities have been provided such as the International Practicum Summit organised in 2019 and NIE Learning Forums (2012, 2015, 2017), for student teachers to "become involved in a culture of learning, collaboration, sharing and discussion as they engage in co-inquiry, and co-construction of knowledge and identity at the beginning of the professional education (Chua et al., 2018, p. 917). Selected student teachers will share with their peers, course tutors, practicum supervisors, local and international researchers and educators their learning experiences, reflection and professional growth. Student teachers are also empowered to share the challenges they faced, their learning gleaned from their inquiry, refinements to their pedagogical approaches and their professional growth through a biannual PPI publication. To date, 3 issues were published and 53 student teachers have contributed to the publication.

Discussion

This section provides snapshots of the journeys of 5 English pre-service student teachers extracted from their published reflective pieces in the 3 binannual PPI publications. Although student teachers were invited by their PPI tutors to contribute to these volumes, all pieces which have been published were completely voluntary. The criteria were that they needed to be from all ITP programmes and representative of all subject areas. The 5 reflective pieces discussed in this section were the only contributions for English Language i.e. no reflections by English student teachers were left out. An attempt will be made to show how through their professional sharing, these student teachers have appeared to imbibe the culture of *reflection*, *inquiry* and *identity* – essential ingredients needed to develop into autonomous thinking teachers.

Reflection

The Reflective Practice Model adopted by the PPI course has provided a systematic framework to guide student teachers through the process of reflection and enabled them to can gain deeper insights into ways for enhancing their own practice. This is evidenced in W. K. Ow Yong's (2017)

extract. The student teacher from PGDE (Secondary) programme, who is was in training to be an English and Literature, wrote,

"… it is essential to cultivate and demonstrate subject mastery, honed by reflective and analytic thinking. Particularly in the higher-end Secondary 3 Express classes, some students will ask sharp and pertinent questions (e.g. about different kinds of modal verbs or the motivations of different characters in the plays studied), which demands that the teacher is fully able not only to respond to such questions but for the further prompt students to ask deeper questions that will trigger higher order thinking. The skill of responding to complex questions with depth and sophistication is a rare but vital one, and as teachers, we need to cultivate it amongst our students in order for them to become truly mature thinkers." (p. 24)

Ow Yong's reflection about the importance of cultivating and demonstrating "subject mastery honed by reflective and analytic thinking" on the part of the teacher is a conclusion he reached having taught students at the "higher-end" of the secondary school spectrum. He postulated that having content knowledge alone may not suffice in developing "mature thinkers" i.e., what is needed by teachers is the skill to be able to respond with "deeper questions" to stimulated higher order thinking among the students. The link that he made between his practice and textbook understanding of the importance of higher ordering thinking through questioning in English and Literature classes is a powerful one. PPI provides the intellectual space for novice teachers like Ow Yong to link theory to practice in their professional journey of self-discovery.

While Ow Yong reflected upon a specific teaching strategy, C. Goh (2015), also an English and Literature student teacher from the PGDE (Secondary) programme, pondered over her role and purpose as a teacher as well as the importance of journaling and thinking. She wrote,

"The motivating factor through this experience came from the moments of deep reflection: when I found myself unable to forget the heavy responsibility upon me … I found that I needed to remember my reason for teaching, and never lose sight of it. Referring to my e-portfolio and reflective blog entries strengthened my resolve to stay true to myself and my beliefs that I had concretised during my time in NIE … Indeed, my experiences with journaling online through the e-portfolio and my own personal blog have shown me the benefits of thinking through ideas and concepts carefully and then recording these ideas down for encouragement of other readers in the online community." (pp. 56-57)

While the PPI course teaches student teachers how to compose their individual teaching philosophies, teachers like Goh often confirm or confront their initial thoughts and convictions about teaching only during their teaching practicum stints. It is evident from the extract where she pronounced that journaling via the digital portfolio has helped her concretised certain ideas about being a teacher and reminded her of the "heavy responsibility" she has undertaken. Like Goh who wrote about the "the benefits of thinking through ideas and concepts carefully", Ow Yong was even more explicit in his assessment of how the digital portfolio provided him with the platform to learn through reflection and sharing. He wrote:

"The e-portfolio platform was thus instrumental for my learning, not only by providing my supervisors a clearer picture of my progress over the term, but also in allowing me to reflect on my own teaching practice in greater depth." (p. 22)

Inquiry

An important feature of the PPI course is the process of inquiry where student teachers engage in an intentional, visible and continuous cycle of data-driven, evidence-based inquiry. In doing so, there is the hope that they are better able take action in their teaching, strive for improvement and eventually make positive change to their teaching and profession (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008; Liu et al., 2017). Essentially, teacher inquiry can be seen as a systematic, intentional study of a teacher's own professional practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Student teachers are thus encouraged to develop a disposition towards inquiry as they see it as part of their daily work as teachers. T. Yong's (2017) reflections to a large extent embodies this disposition:

"I hope to have reinforced my point that an attitude of inquiry is truly an important disposition to have in teaching. As illustrated in my own journey, I have consciously attempted to look 'inwards' and 'outwards'. Rather than just going through the momentum of day-to-day experience, looking inwards means that I am constantly spurred to reflect on my teaching experience, asking myself questions after each lesson I have conducted, gathering appropriate data to give me insight on questions which guide my thinking, and paying attention to the challenges of my craft in order to work on areas of improvement. As I begin to make inquiry a habit I am a better educator because I have begun to explore questions about my practice in a systematic way."(p. 56)

Yong, a PGDE (Sec) English and Geography student teacher, captured the essence of teacher inquiry aptly in ruminating that inquiry is a "conscious" endeavour and that it really is part of a teacher's daily work i.e., "asking myself questions after each lesson I have conducted". She also captured effectively the "what" and the "how" of professional inquiry which entails a virtuous cycle of reflection, posing questions, data collection, analysis, making changes and sharing. The spirit of inquiry is also evident in another piece by D. Chng (2019), a BA (Education) (Primary) student teacher:

"I engaged in many sessions of personal reflection and mini research projects to experiment with different strategies and resources. This enabled me to critically review my approaches and as lesson plans and make necessary changes to them … I feel that these many forms of action research and data collection are extremely important for teachers. Although it may seem tedious and unnecessary, it informs us about the success of our teaching strategies, approaches and instruction."

That inquiry informs practice –succinctly articulated by Chng – is a recurring theme in many of the reflective pieces. Many have stated that it was because of the evidence that they collected that prompted them to change some aspects of their practice. Case in point is Ow Yong's (2017) account of his attempts at teaching text editing:

"The accuracy of data was particularly crucial, considering that my teaching practice varied, depending on what the data presented. For example, the results from the students' first few editing texts alerted me to their weaknesses in grammar and a significant variation in language standards between members of the class. Accordingly, in order to maintain their engagement with the material, I adapted my grammar lessons to suit their learning styles better by targeting only key areas that they were especially weak in." (p. 22)

Considering that Ow Yong was still a student teacher when he articulated this is testament to his maturity of thought. His thoughts are also revealing of a developing set of dispositions showing a willingness to change and adapt to the needs of his environment. This is evidenced when he wrote, "considering that my teaching practice varied, depending on what the data presented". Ow Yong has demonstrated autonomy in making decisions for his learners and, as alluded to in our epigraph at the start of this article, he went "beyond 'covering the curriculum' to actually enable learning for students" (Bransford et al, 2005) with different learning styles.

Identity

Autonomous thinking teachers are aware of their teacher identity. The teaching practicum supported by the PPI initiative provides NIE student teachers with a platform to reflect on their selves as well as their practices. This deep understanding of one's teacher personhood is essential and forms the foundation for professional growth (Krzywacki, 2009; Walkington, 2005). Many of the reflective pieces by the student teachers reveal strong beliefs about who they are and what they want to be as teachers.

Suhaimi (2019) for example, who was training to be an English and Math teacher in the PGDE (Secondary) programme, wrote about his identity: "I see myself as a teacher of students rather than a teacher of subjects … This means that I care about my students' holistic development and not only their performance in the subjects I teach." (p. 24). Chng (2019), on the other hand, uses the analogy of the farmer to describe her role as a teacher-cum-nurturer. She sees herself as farmer and her learners as "little seeds that need the right conditions in order to germinate". And as a farmer, the teacher needs "to understand the type of plant he or she is dealing with then is aware of the differing conditions each plant requires". She argues that teachers like farmers "are also responsible for the quality of the yield" (p. 131). While Suhaimi and Chng have different personal constructs of their teacher identities – i.e., how they see themselves as teachers and how they feel as teachers (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Gee, 2001; Mayer, 1999) – they were both clear in linking these identities to their practices and how they see or connect with their learners.

Goh (2015) quite insightfully wrote that "[t]he teacher cannot think for the students, nor can s/he impose their thought[s] on them. Real thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, only takes place in communication and dialogue ... Clearly, the existential flavours the Socratic method of questioning or what we know here as critical thinking, a practice I believe should happen in every one of my classes." (pp. 54-55). Goh is effective in linking her belief – that learners should be allowed to think for themselves without teachers imposing their views – with her preferred choice of pedagogy – i.e., the Socratic method of questioning – is evidence that even though she is a

novice in the profession, she is quite acutely aware of her teacher personhood and how it comes to bear on her choice of practice.

Conclusion

This paper has described in considerable detail, changes made to Singapore's ITP, with special attention placed on its thinking teacher model (NIE, 2009). It also explicated the Professional Practice and Inquiry (PPI) initiative which is both a framework and a platform to curate student teachers understandings across all their courses, reflect deeply about teaching and learning and highlight their best work. This paper also attempted to show, through the use of pre-service student teachers' published reflective pieces, how PPI has, in part, shaped the thinking of 5 young English teachers. Evidenced, particularly in Goh's (2015), Yong's (2017) and Suhaimi's (2019) pieces, are the awareness of their environments and the actions they took to respect them. This perhaps is the 'ecological' approach to agency that Priestley et al (2013) talked about – where teacher agents will "always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment" (p. 3). It is with hope that through time and with experience these 5 teachers will develop into autonomous thinking teachers.

What would be useful to substantiate the claims made in this paper would be empirical data about PPI and its effects in developing English teacher agency. A few ideas: One, a more fine-grained analysis of the actual portfolios of English student teachers with a larger sample size. Two, a longitudinal study of the impact of PPI i.e., pre and post programme surveys and interviews followed by case studies of a group of English teachers for the next 5 years of their service. Three, a comparative study of English pre-service teachers and what agency might look like for them compared to their counterparts in other disciplines.

The Autonomous Thinking Teacher Model (NIE, 2009) – our model of developing teacher agency – continues to be a work-in-progress. There is still much to learn and improve the ways in which we understand agency – especially how it develops through the years and in the different subject disciplines. However, we know for certain that the 21st century requires teachers who possess a set of skills and dispositions that are different from their predecessors. The strong ownership of growth in professional practice, passion to learn and respect for their environments are what will set them apart. As such, it is apt to end this article with a quote from a student teacher who opined about the role of teaching:

"Teaching … does not involve the mere transmission of ideas to passive auditors or the regurgitation of mundane propositions. Rather, it is the kindling of a passion, driven by a conviction that effective teaching depends on close engagement with students' lived experience." (Ow Yong, 2017, p. 17)

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Article

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**The Weight of Our Words: Language and Teacher Agency
from the Perspective of Gee's 'Cultural Models'**

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I suggest that one way to enhance teacher agency is to practise greater linguistic awareness in our professional conversations. Based on a conceptual framework utilising the idea of 'cultural models' (everyday theories expressed in language) I analyse primary data of Malaysian English-language teachers' meetings to show two ways in which they have an impact on practice and agency. Based on the evidence, I claim that cultural models [1] function as problem-framing devices and [2] can support transformations in practice. The data in this paper comes from audio-visual recordings of teacher meetings, generated as part of a larger study on teacher collaborative discourse in professional learning communities (PLC), with English-language teachers at Malaysian national secondary schools. Based on these findings, I argue that teacher agency—defined as the capacity to make a difference in the context of teachers' work—is partly a function of how teachers *speak* about the relevant domains of their practice, be they students, subject or pedagogy. This offers practitioners who wish to be more agentic in their practice some relevant points for reflection.

KEYWORDS: teacher agency, cultural models, social linguistics, professional learning communities, Malaysia

Introduction

Teacher agency can be defined and conceptualised in a range of ways, with different emphases and nuances (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). A satisfactory definition, in my view, is to call it *the capacity to make a difference*, according to their values and moral purpose (Frost, 2006). This definition begs the question: what are the skills, dispositions, practices, and activities that make up teachers' ability to 'make a difference', to have a positive impact on their own, their colleagues' and students' learning?

In this article, I address *one* aspect of social practice that has an impact on teacher agency: language. It has been argued that our actions are to an extent reflections of our thoughts and beliefs (Bruner, 1996). Gee (2015) adds a valuable contribution to this theoretical perspective by pointing out that our thoughts are in part dependent on the forms of *language* we use, which themselves are imbued with values, assumptions, and meanings. This implies that *agency* to an extent relies on *language*—in the case of teachers, language used in relation to domains of practice such as students, subject knowledge and pedagogy.

Literature Review

The central concept I use is Gee's notion of 'cultural models'. These refer to the linguistic manifestation of people's everyday theories for simplifying and making sense of complexity, and can be said to be synonymous with terms like 'folk theories', 'frames', 'scripts', 'mental models', 'figured worlds' or 'lived ideologies' (Gee, 2015: 113-115), each possessing their respective emphases and nuances.

Undoubtedly, cultural models exist 'in our heads', but also exist 'out there', in spoken and written form. Cultural models constitute a characteristic way of saying, doing and being that enables one to be recognised as a particular type of person acting in a particular context. Crucially, cultural models are 'ideologies' in that they are necessarily simplifications of external reality, mental 'shorthand' to assist sense making and to make judgements about what things mean based on context and experience.

Some examples of cultural models can be the labels we use for our students like 'fast kids', 'slow kids', 'lazy kids', 'strong kids' or 'simple kids'. Each of these labels function as categories for interpreting our lived realities as teachers. While each expression no doubt at least partially reflects external reality, that is not the same as saying an idea like 'these are slow kids' is the complete unvarnished truth—reality is often more complicated, and therefore our labels can always be questioned, subject to more nuance or at least open to revision (Horn, 2007). Sometimes when people say 'slow', they mean 'unintelligent', or 'less competent', yet we know that quickness and intelligence are not the same thing.

Gee argues that we invariably see the world, both consciously and unconsciously, through the lenses supplied by language or some other symbolic systems—'we could not think, talk or act without them' (p. 112). Because cultural models are such a fundamental part of social life, the models that we hold to and express are highly consequential. They are not 'just talk and no action' but function to *ground* our beliefs and *inform* our actions (Gee, 2015; Black, 2007; Maxwell, 2014). After all, human beings are reflexive, meaning-making creatures, possessing capacities such as agency and sense-making (Smith, 2010). Therefore, it follows that concepts and beliefs make a difference to actions, even though the relationship between beliefs/theories and actions is complicated, often indirect, and sometimes inconsistent (Biesta, 2020; Tam, 2015). It is for this reason that I say *ground* and *inform*, not *determine*. Obviously, words and actions do not *always* align with one another—in fact, for various reasons words should not always be taken at face value (Hammersley, 2003); however, that is not to say that words do not have any impact whatsoever. On that proviso, I propose a working conceptual framework (Figure 1).
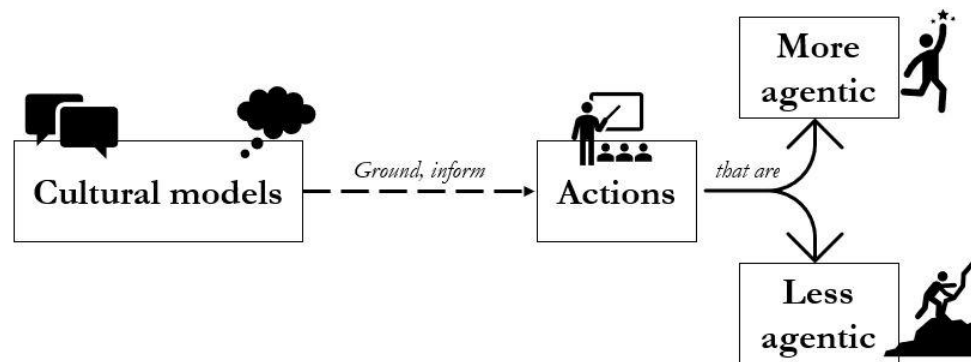
Figure 1.0. Cultural Models, Actions and Teacher Agency -- A Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is straightforward: [1] our cultural models (the thinking-and-speaking constructs that we create to make sense of the world and to achieve our purposes) function to [2] ground and inform our actions, [3] in ways that can be more or less agentic. This simple framework provides us a mental model for how the concepts in the study hang together. However, what does the evidence say?

The Empirical View

Studies have shown that teachers' cultural models for *categorising* their students are consequential, mediating pedagogical decisions by individual teachers (Daniels, 2006, Olson, 1999; Davis, 2007) and shaping the institutional, school-wide decisions, sometimes with problematic equity outcomes (Mehan, 1993; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Horn, 2007; Säljö & Hjörne, 2009). For example, mathematics' teachers' labelling of students as 'fast kids, slow kids, lazy kids' framed decision-making about their learners (Horn, 2007; see also Louie, 2017). Moreover, Louie (2018) demonstrated that teachers' cultural models about their students can shape what they notice or miss about their students' strengths. Problematically, it was found that dominant ideologies or frames about students worked ended up positioning students from non-dominant communities as mathematically deficient rather than as sense-makers whose ideas can and should be used as the basis for further learning.

Moreover, teachers' cultural models about themselves and even the nature of knowledge itself had an effect on whether they could develop more inclusive cultural models of their students. Louie (2016) shows how, even in a seemingly 'ideal' PLC where teachers engaged thoroughly with the tensions between restrictive and inclusive discourses about mathematical competence, certain 'dominant discourses' about the nature of professional knowledge (as idiosyncratic and personal, rather than shareable and open to debate) had the effect of undermining their attempt to reframe their work in more expansive and inclusive ways.

To put it simply, the evidence suggests that our linguistically-bound concepts shape what we notice or think possible, thereby indirectly shaping agency, or our different 'horizons of possibility'

(Rainio & Hofmann, 2015). To make concrete what I mean, this paper will describe some illustrative examples taken from the Malaysian ELT context.

Method

Overview

In this paper I use two case studies, taken from a larger research project on teacher learning in collaborative discourse among Malaysian English-language teachers. The data were generated over a nine-month period, through video-recordings of teacher meetings in two national secondary schools. The data are 'naturally-occurring' in that the data is based on activities which would have happened absent of external involvement—unlike interviews, which are specific social situations that are elicited by researchers (Silverman, 2013). An implication of this is that the data are not of teachers responding to a researcher's questions, but interacting with their colleagues without external interference.

Sampling and Case Selection

I conducted a 'two-stage' sampling procedure. The first stage was conducted on purposive sampling logic, specifically the 'critical case' strategy (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Schools were approached on the basis of being 'best case scenarios', reputed to be committed to forming and maintaining professional learning communities (PLCs). As the purpose of the project was to study collaborative discourse, there would have been little point selecting a school whose teachers did not meet regularly. On these criteria, two schools agreed to participate.

The PLC initiative is a key ingredient in the national strategy for teacher professional development in Malaysia. Its influence began with the introduction of the Lesson Study circa 2011, with subsequent expansion and refinement in 2013 under the Malaysian Education Blueprint and 2019 under the 'New Narrative in Educational Practice' (Tiong, 2019). The idea behind PLCs is to increase teacher capacity through collaboration that focuses on ensuring students learn. This policy initiative is an opportunity for researchers to study teacher conversations, since dialogue is an essential component of PLCs (Tiong, 2019).

The second stage of sampling entailed within-data sampling (Mason, 2018). This approach is relevant with research where the researcher does not influence what is said or done by participants, and therefore generates data that are highly varied. This sampling takes a theoretically relevant question and 'mines' the data for parts that can answer the question, in accordance with abductive reasoning and the search for analytical surprise (Timmermans & Tavory, 2014). Stage two was conducted after the meeting data were transcribed verbatim and narrative summaries were produced of each meeting. Moreover, the meetings were divided into 'episodes' that mark coherent topical shifts in the data.

Data Generation and Ethics

The audio-visual data were collected with a Panasonic HC-V770 Camcorder, combined with three accessories: a compatible tripod, a set of Sennheiser ew 100 G3 wireless transmitters, and an EM-

700 boundary microphone (paired to transmitters). The equipment allowed for the camera to be positioned to capture all the participants within a wider frame while being less obtrusive. Similarly, the small and unassuming microphone was positioned equidistant to participants so that the recording captured participants' speech clearly (Figure 2.0).
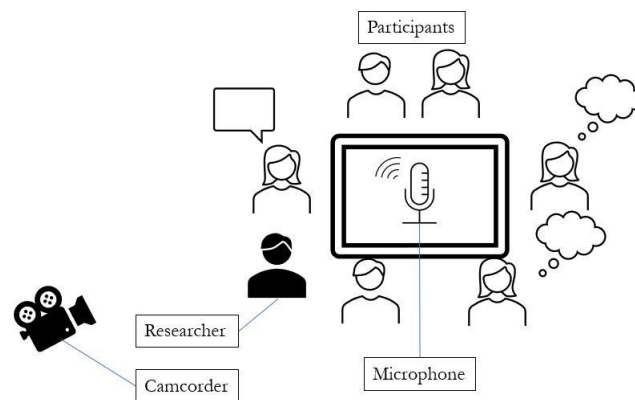

Figure 2.0. Audio-Visual Data Collection

Audio-visual data allows for more direct examination of teachers' collaborative discourse than other methods. Moreover, it allows for multiple viewings, so that the analyst may consider different perspectives and notice aspects of the data that may be missed at first glance (as would be the case if relying only on observation notes), which help safeguard validity and reliability. Video use had various ethical implications, including the heightened risk that the data would be more performative than naturalistic. Nonetheless, the advantages of video were deemed to outweigh its anticipated risks, and various steps were taken to mitigate potential downsides and risk. These steps include extensive rapport-building and visits to school before recording. The research was conducted with the consent of the participants, and with prior approval by relevant governing authorities (EPRD, JPN).

Data Management and Analysis

The video data were transcribed verbatim and segmented into episodes for analysis. Moreover, multi-episode 'chains' were created to allow for analysis that 'zooms out' to capture the development of ideas over a longer period of time, across episodes in single meetings, and across meetings among the same teachers (see Mercer, 2008 for the various methodological justifications involved). These moves provided flexible units that enable granular analysis while also capturing wider horizons of context, which are relevant for making sense of the data (Little, 2002).

In terms of analysis, the literature examined above informed my decision to focus on teachers' cultural models about their *students.* The key move for analysis was to infer what teachers' cultural models were, based on three kinds of indicators. The first indicator was to read direct claims that teachers made about their students (as seen in the S7O1 data below). The second indicator was to locate teachers' expression of surprise, which would suggest a prior cultural model that was contrary to what was expressed. Finally, the third indicator was to infer from an utterance with a

normative component, such as the identification of a problem. To claim that something is a problem suggests a value-laden cultural model about how things should be (as seen in the S1O9 data below). Overall, the analysis process was iterative and based on abductive reasoning, that is to consistently work with multiple possible interpretations to every instance and engage in counterfactual thinking to adjudicate between them (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). The three indicators above were used in dialogue with contextual details captured in the video data as well as through the researcher's field notes.

Results

Cultural Models in the Framing of Problems of Practice

I begin first with data that show, at a basic level, one way cultural models are visibly employed in teachers' workplace interactions: to make sense of or 'frame' problems of practice. To do this, I refer to data from a '*dialog prestasi*' where the teachers discussed their students' performance, predicted their likely grades for the next examination sitting (SPM) and shared and discussed potential interventions.

In this episode, a teacher (Elia) talks about the students in her class (5 Elanor):

Meeting S1O9, Episode 2 (Part 1)
1 ELIA : Okay, shall I start with my 5 ELANOR.
2 TULIP : Yes, please. 5 ELANOR, okay.
3 ELIA : My 5 ELANOR, we had twelve students there, but out of the 12, only eight are regulars.
4 TULIP : You mean come to school?
5 ELIA : Yes, <u>four</u>, every <u>week</u> you can find them being absent and having a straight face, they can get called down, they will go and explain, come back and still have a straight face and <u>be absent</u> again. And…
6 MAWAR: Their excuse for being absent?
7 ELIA : One is actually… the one who is every week, HASVINDER, he will pass <u>definitely</u>, but he has an OKU mother needing help at <u>home</u>. [2:00] [Chorus of 'Oh…']
8 She is a single <u>parent</u>, and an auntie helps him with transport to the school. So there are days when his mother needs him to be at home… and he's at home. He will pass, he <u>could</u> be better than that, but… because he's absent all the <u>time</u>… mm, not too sure. So that's HASVINDER.

This ideas expressed here were fairly commonplace in both participating schools, where teachers report their students as facing various home-based challenges. Elia singles out one student, Hasvinder, who 'will pass' but '<u>could</u> be better than that'. This, based on indicator 3, implies the cultural model that it is preferable to do as well as one possibly can—and reflects Elia's judgement as teacher that Hasvinder's results fall below his potential. It is clear that Elia thinks that this is a *problem*. The conversation continues and Elia's colleagues probe her claims more closely.

Meeting S1O9, Episode 2 (Part 2)
10   MAWAR: How are her marks, in the recent mid-year exams?
11   ELIA   : No la, not yet lah.
12   TULIP : We've only finished with 5 ISTARI.
13   MAWAR: See how, see how (??)
14   ELIA   : How he does? Okay.
15   MAWAR: How about the March test?
16   ELIA   : He <u>passed</u>. He got 53. That kind of marks.
17   TULIP : Last year? Uh… did he pass?
18   ELIA   : <u>Yes</u>.
19   TULIP : Can pass?
20   ELIA   : Yes, can pass.
21   TULIP : In his fifties? Forties?
22   ELIA   : Fifties.
23   MAWAR: Okay lah, 50s is okay lah.
24   TULIP : D's are better than G's.

To begin with, Mawar asks Elia about Hasvinder's marks in the recent mid-year examinations. In response, Elia reports that Hasvinder passed the most recently available test; however, by saying 'He got 53. That kind of marks', Elia conveys disappointment, persisting with the same problem framing. As the episode continues, however, a shift can be observed as Mawar and Tulip suggest an alternative perspective. Mawar's statement that Hasvinder's score was 'Okay lah. 50s is okay lah' is supported by Tulip, who claimed that 'D's are better than G's', referring to the grade system in place at the school.

How can these findings be interpreted? I would argue that the question here is not about 'correctness', or who is 'right' or 'wrong'—but what we can reason about the consequences of statements. At face value, Elia, Mawar and Tulip all make valid claims, but with different emphases that have different *implications*. One might argue that Elia's problem framing maintains a level of tension between the current state of affairs and her desired state, which is that Hasvinder performs closer to perceived potential. Mawar and Tulip's cultural model is more concessionary. In their view, Hasvinder *may* be a problem, but it *could* be worse. 'D's are better than G's'. The problem therefore becomes reframed as less urgent or problematic.

These findings are consequential, because as I observed in the other parts of the data, whenever teachers issued a stronger problem framing, they would 'stay' with the problem for longer, dissecting its nuances more carefully and exploring potential solutions. The same commitment to issues was reduced whenever problems were reframed to be less problematic, such as in dealing with Hasvinder. Therefore, it appears that teachers' cultural models indeed contribute to problem framing, which then influences further action.

Shifts in Cultural Models Preceding Transformations in Practice

Next, I use another case to show that shifts in teachers' cultural models can precede and support transformations in practice. The episode is taken from a meeting where teachers were taking turns to talk about problems of practice and to suggest solutions. Prior to this episode, one teacher (Dahlia) had shared a writing scaffold she had found online, the 'O.R.E.O.'. Named after household biscuit brand, this stands for 'Opinion, Reason, Evidence, Opinion', a basic mnemonic device (Putnam, 2015) to help students organise their writing. Upon sharing the idea, Dahlia left the meeting to retrieve her materials so that she could demonstrate to her colleagues. This episode begins just as Dahlia returns:

> **Meeting S7O1, Episode 4 (Part 1)**
> DAHLIA : Okay this is the one… that uh ((lofts a laminated paper describing the OREO framework))
> ROS : Oreo.
> MELUR : Oreo
> ROS : Eh… I've <u>seen</u> this one. ((reaches to take it from MELUR – studies it)) If only they can write reasons ((laughs)) to start with ((laughs))
> DAHLIA : Yea yea the <u>reason is</u> yes, of course they can
> ALAMANDA : Eh they can give reasons. They can, seriously.

Ros' reaction to O.R.E.O. was to exclaim: 'if only they [the students] can write reasons to start with.' This remark was not uncharacteristic of the general view in that school, whose students struggled with learning English. The point about students being able to reason was relevant, as the success of the O.R.E.O. tool depends on that ability. In this case, Ros's words communicated a particular cultural model of their students. However, this was quickly rebutted by Alamanda and Dahlia. The rebuttals are emphatic—note their language ('of course' and 'they can, seriously'). To back up their claims, these colleagues offer evidence contrary to Ros' claim, mostly via replays of students demonstrating the ability to reason, in and out of class:

> **Meeting S7O1, Episode 4 (Part 2)**
> DAHLIA : Ok one topic I gave them… I gave them a very simple topic
> what uh what is the best pet, what is the best pet. I just ask them that
> ALAMANDA : Students are late to school, they'll give reasons ah for example
> DAHLIA : =What is the best pet then they say la bird la this and that
> okay I said, that is <u>your opinion.</u> Your opinion is –
> ALAMANDA : They're creative [ROS: Yea] very creative, they can say all kinds of things.
> DAHLIA : =Ah then they can say <u>ah </u>dog is the bes- best pet. Okay then I say why?
> MELUR : Mm.
> DAHLIA : So uh they say loving la cute la <u>ah ah </u>then okay put there <u>cute </u>and then <u>loving</u> ((mimes writing both words out)) uh:: then <u>active</u>, <u>playful,</u> ok put by one by one –
> ALAMANDA : Then then they know how to construct the sentence
> DAHLIA : <u>Then</u>, give me reason. Simple only, ask them to write.
> ROS : =You have extra anot or you only printed one.
> DAHLIA : I only printed one and uh but I I uh I can uh
> ALAMANDA : You can photocopy, easy.

      ROS   : Share share la
      ALAMANDA : =Share

Alamanda argues that in everyday situations, such as students being late for school, they are able to give reasons. She concludes that they are 'very creative'. Dahlia supports Alamanda's argument by giving examples of an actual classroom activity she conducts with the student, mimicking their answers and pairing them with the O.R.E.O. framework. The episode ends with Ros requesting that Dahlia shares the printout with her, an implicit display of agreement. I suggest that this marks a shift from the cultural model that 'our students can't reason' to 'students *can* reason', supporting the adoption of O.R.E.O. into the teachers' repertoire of practice. This was found to be a consequential achievement, evidenced by how, in subsequent meetings, the teachers adopted, adapted, and integrated the OREO strategy into their teaching repertoire (Figure 3.0).

Figure 3.0 traces the discursive development of the O.R.E.O. tool, specifically by Ros across five meetings, over six months. Given that it was Ros' pessimistic view of students which triggered S7O1.4, it was significant to see these developments. The sequence in Figure 3.0 begins with S7O1.4, which I have just discussed, where Ros was won over by her colleagues' view.

Ros' story does not end there. In the next meeting after a month (S7O2.2), another colleague (Embun) was vexed about being required to conduct an action-research project, to be reported to the District Education Office (*Pusat Pendidikan Daerah*). In response to Embun's problem, Ros pipes up to suggest that she should just use O.R.E.O., saying that it's 'good, it's easy'. Alamanda agrees, saying it 'works for her too'. Although in this episode Ros does not elaborate, at face value this suggests Ros had either tried it out herself and found it helpful, or at least been persuaded that it would be.

More evidence of the progress in Ros thinking is displayed in S7O4, which happens about two months after S7O2. In this meeting, Ros enthusiastically explained how she had integrated O.R.E.O. with 'I-Palm SVO' (a separate teaching tool, to do with subject-verb agreement), giving a complex and detailed retelling of how she does that in her class (S7O4.11a). Subsequently, in S7O4.11b, Ros elaborates that O.R.E.O. is not only useful for organising students' written work, as Dahlia had suggested, but also for helping students structure their verbal participation in the PT3 (*Penilaian Tahap 3*) assessments. She continued by making links to the Ministry's assessment training which she had attended, replaying a detailed scenario in which she uses O.R.E.O. to help her students prepare for it.

S7O2.2

Embun is stressed about having to conduct an action-research project to be submitted to District. Ros suggests she just uses OREO ('good' + 'easy') Alamanda supports, saying it 'works'!

S7O1.4

Dahlia and Alamanda persuade Ros that students **can** reason, and therefore the OREO strategy is viable. Ros asks for Dahlia to share the resource.

S7O4.11a

Ros describes her combination of OREO and I-Palm SVO as 'really helping her students'. She gives a complex replay of how she does it.

S7O5.4

In a meeting to discuss pedagogical approaches, Ros uses OREO to help explain what she thinks the meeting is trying to achieve.

S7O4.11b

ROS adds that OREO isn't just helpful for organising written work but for the students' speaking assessments. She makes explicit links to her assessment training and replays an example
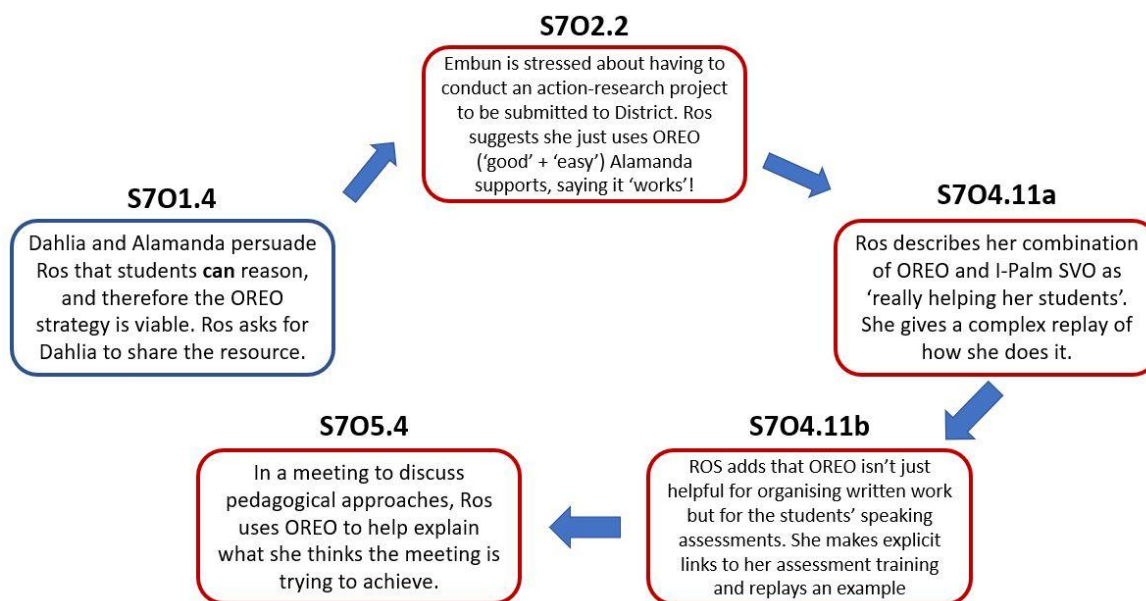
Figure 3.0. Ros' Story Over 6 Months

These three episodes suggest that Ros did not only adopt the tool but adapted and integrated it with others in her repertoire of practice. Another month later, in a meeting with members from the History department (S7O5.4), Ros used OREO to help explain essay-writing scaffolds to a History teacher. This shows that the tool had become part of her language for talking about practice, such that she was using it to explain it to colleagues outside the group.

Overall, this case study demonstrates a clear sense of progression, the seed of an idea (O.R.E.O.) being planted and going through iterative cycles of trials and reflection, where the strategy is not merely implemented, but adapted and integrated within a wider repertoire of practice. While it is not possible to definitely say that this is *caused* by the shift in teachers' cultural model in S7O1.4, at the very least it can be said that the shift contributed, or removed barriers, for these further developments. It is hard to imagine that the uptake would have been so positive had the teachers persisted with the discourse that 'it would never work with our kids, they can't reason'.

Discussion

Due to limited space, this paper only presents two case studies of how cultural models influence what we think and do, individually and collectively. The examples show that cultural models are not necessarily static—they can change and shift, with implications on agency. Both cases showed opposing cultural models interacting with one another in teachers' discussions of their problems of practice. In S1O9 we saw how cultural models contribute to the problem framing, expressing meanings that would have implications on what further action to take. S7O1's optimistic shift in how teachers' conceptualised their students' capabilities was shown to support, or at least reduce barriers to, Ros' adoption and integration of a new teaching tool into her repertoire of practice. Future research may perhaps look more closely at the discursive manoeuvres, tools and conditions

that can support those shifts in teachers' cultural models, both within and beyond the conversations that take place in professional meetings.

This paper has important limitations. Firstly, I have had to be selective in the data presented—therefore this study does not make claims of generalisability, nor of capturing the full range of possible variations to this phenomenon. I do think however that the data here offer proof of concept about my argument about language and teacher agency. Another limitation is that changes in beliefs do not necessarily entail changes in actions, nor the other way around: there will be situations where actions change without corresponding conceptual modification, and vice versa (Tam, 2015). To this I will say two things. Firstly, I would argue, as others have, that changing the way we talk about our work, while not a *guarantee* of change, is at least an *opportunity*, or requisite for it (Rainio & Hofmann, 2015; Virkkunen et al., 2012). Secondly, I would argue that changes in actions *without* the supporting conceptual change is only surface-level change, and is therefore relatively fragile. Pedagogical transformation would likely have more depth and resilience if behaviour and cultural models or beliefs go hand in hand.

Lastly, I am not arguing that all we need to improve agency is to change the way we talk about our work. From an 'ecological' perspective, teachers' fields of actions always interact with the structures around them, be it institutions, policy or societal constraints and enablers (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). Context will always be a matter to agency, and so better policy and design, whether in the domain of school leadership, teacher appraisal, working conditions, professional development, or initial teacher training, are all important parts of the larger, more complex equation.

This paper pertains to just a small part of that equation, close to an individual's sphere of influence. While there is no doubt that there are structural constraints that should be acknowledged and addressed, an accessible 'low-hanging' fruit for change is to at least be have greater awareness about our assumptions and concepts, expressed in how we talk, which do have some influence on our practice.

Returning to the study's initial conceptual framework, some additions and alterations may be made (Figure 4.0), emphasising the dynamic aspect of the findings—that cultural models can change and shape more or less agentic action. The figure shows that one pathway for changing our practice as teachers is to start by reflecting on the language we use about our practice.
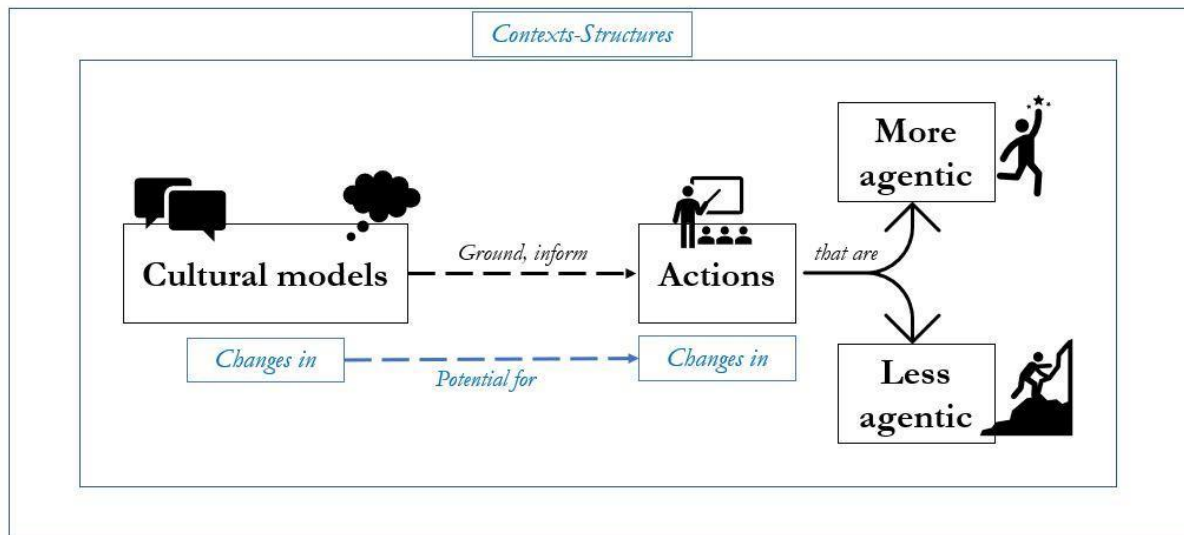
Figure 4.0. Revised Conceptual Framework based on Findings

Conclusion

The findings suggest that, in the interest of teacher agency and educational improvement, we should attend to the processes by which we can shape the linguistically-bound concepts that we employ in our work. PLCs are but one of many contexts where this is possible—indeed it has been argued that teachers' on-the-job discourse in informal settings may be more influential than what happens in formal professional development (Lefstein, Vedder-Weiss & Segal, 2020). In this paper at least, the two cases show that discourse in PLCs can create shifts to cultural models that are either more agentic or less so.

Practically speaking, I observe that we tend to think of professional meetings (in the Malaysian context: PLC meetings, *dialog prestasi*, CPD, panel meetings, so on), as sites where teachers exchange ideas, tell stories, and distribute tasks. My hope is that this paper raises the awareness that professional conversations are also implicitly where beliefs and attitudes (expressed linguistically) collide and interact, with consequences on what happens in classrooms.

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Article

(Re)constructing Teacher Identity through the Contesting Narratives of ELT Associations

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ABSTRACT

Discussions in the mainstream media about the declining standard of English in Malaysia have focused on a variety of contributing factors, one of the more prominent being the quality of teaching. English language teachers have been central actors in these narratives and are often easy targets for assigning blame. Left uncontested, such narratives have the capacity to shape a damaging image of Malaysian English language teachers which can have lasting implications for the ELT profession in the country. Fortunately, alternative voices emerge to challenge narratives describing Malaysian English language teachers as inept and incompetent. In this paper, I examine such narratives as they are presented through multimodal texts published and circulated in the public domain by the Malaysian English Language Teaching Association. Drawing on the frameworks of Systemic-Functional Linguistics and visual grammar, I examine a series of posters disseminated through the association's social media platforms. The analysis unpacks the language and images used in the posters, and reveals an alternative discourse in which these teachers are presented as trained professionals with expertise in their field of ELT. The study highlights the important role of ELT associations in representing its members by challenging emerging discourses which threaten the reputation of the profession.

KEYWORDS: ELT associations, Systemic-Functional Linguistics, multimodal texts, teacher identity

Introduction

Despite some contesting views, it remains largely held in most parts of the world that English proficiency is an important tool for career success, and the presence of a workforce proficient in English can significantly impact the economic performance of nations (McCormick, 2017). For this reason, governments invest heavily in ensuring that its people are able to communicate effectively in English in addition to other languages which they may use more regularly for everyday communication.

English proficiency is particularly high in Malaysia's national education agenda. News reports and discussions about the declining standard of English have featured prominently in the country's mainstream media for decades now as everyone from parents to politicians continue to weigh in on the issue. The complaints have generally been that students leaving school are not as proficient as they need to be to meet the demands at the workplace and higher education (Ting, Marzuki, Chuah, Misieng & Jerome, 2017). This is despite the fact that English is taught as a compulsory subject in Malaysian primary and secondary schools.

In more recent times, the launch of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 reignited public conversations yet again about the poor standard of English among Malaysian students. The blueprint proposed 11 shifts to guide the nation's education reform agenda, and one of those shifts deals specifically with language proficiency (Ministry of Education, 2013). Around the time the blueprint was published, English language teachers were asked to sit for a language proficiency test. Based on their performance in the test, it was announced by the then Minister of Education II that two thirds of Malaysia's English language teachers were incapable of teaching the subject and needed to attend courses to help them improve their proficiency in the language (The Star Online, September 11, 2013). This remark by the minister then led to intense discussions about the competence of English language teachers. An investigation of the emerging narratives in the mainstream media by Nair and Arshad (2018) revealed that Malaysian English language teachers were denigrated as they were described as inept and incompetent.

This paper is anchored to the contention that with any professional identity, the identity of teachers is discursively shaped through individual and collective voices (Olausson, 2017; Schrewe, Bates, Pratt, Ruitenberg & McKellin, 2017). Studies on teacher identity, particularly English language teacher identity, are important because it impacts the professional development of language teachers, and by extension, also affects classroom instruction and students (Reeves, 2018). Several studies have focused on language teacher identity for this reason. Yazan (2018) examined the narratives of TESOL student teachers as they made use of a tool for learning through identity development. The practice was found to empower users as it encouraged the view of teachers as knowledge generators. In another study related to implications for language teacher education, Karimi and Mofidi (2019) examined the identity enactment of second language teachers and found a variety of variables which contributed to how teachers saw themselves. Among these variables were the negotiation of varying identities which confronted teachers in the wider community. Studies on language teacher identity have also focused on English language teachers who regard English as an additional language to their first language. Wolff and De Costa (2017) examined how such teachers negotiated emotional challenges as part of their professional identity development and argued that there was a need for new pedagogical models which considered the

emotion-related challenges of English language teachers. Clearly, these studies assert the importance of teacher identity in shaping teacher professionalism and classroom practices. Despite this, few studies have focused on language teacher identity in the Malaysian context.

Discussions on language teacher identity have emerged in the context of broader themes such as the influences on and experiences of pre-service teachers (Macalister, 2017). In a study about English teacher professionalism in Malaysia, Loo (2018) examined the narratives of an English language teacher to illustrate how the teacher's experiences with students, colleagues and classroom practices collectively constructed a multi-faceted image of teacher professionalism. Similarly, in another study by Ahmad and Abd Samad (2018), the narratives of a teacher of young learners were examined to identify the various metaphors which were used to construct the image of an English teacher of young learners. The metaphorical expressions pointed to an identity of the teacher as a nurturer, knowledge provider and disciplinarian, which the researchers argued, was a necessary part of teacher reflective practices. These studies however examined identity construction as performed by the teachers themselves, and did not consider the shaping of teacher identity by external forces. One study which did this was by Nair and Arshad (2018), who examined the discursive construction of English language teachers in Malaysia's mainstream media. The study illustrated the power of external narratives which contributed to a less than desirable image of Malaysian English language teachers. However, the paper was limited by the fact that it did not consider contesting narratives in the public sphere which may serve to challenge the image presented by those possessing discursive power. In the present study, I address this gap by investigating the alternative narratives presented by the Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (MELTA) through its social media platforms. Specifically, I examine how an English language teaching association makes use of posters disseminated in the public sphere to offer contesting narratives which position Malaysian English language teachers in a positive light, thereby challenging existing narratives of the inept Malaysian English language teacher. The dissemination of posters through social media sites is not the same as reports and opinion editorials published in mainstream newspapers. However, both newspapers and social media sites target and eventually reach the public. In examining the dissemination of news via Facebook, Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019) assert that the lines between newspapers and social media sites have blurred, with Facebook becoming an important resource for producers and consumers of news. Therefore, the analysis of the promotional posters developed and distributed by MELTA is discussed in relation to news reports about Malaysian English language teachers because both are accessible to the wider public.

As posters make up the sample for analysis, the present study draws on Systemic-Functional Linguistics and visual grammar to analyse how teachers are represented as participants, as well as within processes and circumstances in language and image. The metafunctional principle within Halliday's Systemic-Functional theory provides the means through which language and visuals can be examined to understand how they interact to create meaning. The theory is anchored to the premise that language and visuals are brought together from a wide set of available resources to create meaning (O'Halloran, 2008). Researchers examining multimodal texts are drawn to Halliday's Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) because it provides a common framework for explaining how both language and visuals serve to construct ideational meaning and enact interpersonal relations (O'Halloran, 2008). SFL calls for an understanding of choices made in

meaning-making from three interrelated metafunctions, namely the ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

Metafunctions are mapped to the grammar of language to explain the functions of language in the meaning-making process. The ideational function is realised through language used to communicate experience and logic. Beyond this, language is also used to enact interpersonal relations between interactants in a communicative act. Mediating the ideational and interpersonal is the textual metafunction which allows the ideational and interpersonal to meet and be represented through grammatical systems. Drawing on SFL, researchers of visual communication later argued that visuals too perform like language to construct meaning. Drawing parallelisms to SFL, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) posit the theory of visual grammar in which visual elements work to create representational and interactive meaning. The following table illustrates the parallel concepts in SFL and visual grammar which are tied to identity construction and power relations:

Table 1: Metafunctions of Language and Parallel Dimensions of Visual Grammar

Metafunctions of Language	Dimensions of Visual Grammar
Ideational Representation of participant experiences and their state of being as found in process types reflected in clause structures. The process types include material, mental, verbal, behavioural, existential, and relational which are marked by verbs.	**Representational** Representation of participant experiences as presented in narrative process (with actors and goals) and conceptual process (participants are represented as ideas in more stable terms such as in analytical or symbolic processes).
Interpersonal The enactment of interpersonal relations between interactants in communication using lexico-grammatical resources which in turn describe social roles and power relations.	**Interactive** The interaction between the producer of the image and the recipient. Messages are encoded by the producer through gaze, social distance represented through fields of vision, power relations represented through the angle of the gaze.
Textual The realisation of the ideational and interpersonal through an organized medium of communication.	**Compositional** The realisation of a text as it is organized through resources such as the layout, positioning, and salience of images

(Source: Ly & Jung, 2015; Shin, Cimasko & Yi, 2020)

Method

The sites for the study are the social media platforms (namely, Facebook and Instagram) of the Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (MELTA). Established in 1958, MELTA is the oldest, and remains the only, national ELT association in Malaysia. Its 2020 annual report indicates membership at over 1000 life and ordinary members.

A review of its social media platform shows that the association actively engages with its followers and keeps its members informed of all upcoming activities. The association's Facebook account has over 7000 followers. A summary of its Facebook engagement report between 11 November 2020 and 11 December 2020 for example revealed that the association posted a total of 14 announcements within a one-month timeframe. Of the 14 announcements, 7 were announcements of upcoming MELTA activities, 2 were announcements of upcoming English language teaching and learning activities organised by other associations, 1 was a greeting for an upcoming festival, and 4 were announcements providing access to reports and recordings of past activities.

All upcoming activities were promoted with posters created to inform members and the wider community of English language teachers. All posters published by MELTA between the months of May and December 2020 were downloaded from the association's Facebook page. Next, posters which featured Malaysian English language teachers by naming them and/or presenting an image of them were isolated. Other posters such as festive greetings were eliminated.

The posters disseminated through MELTA's Facebook and Instagram accounts make up the sample for analysis because it is established that non-profit organisations rely a great deal on social media platforms for direct communication and engagement with stakeholders (Del Giudice, Maggioni, Rathi, Given, & Forcier, 2014; Leong, Pan, Ractham, & Kaewkitipong, 2015; Lober & Flowers, 2011; Pang, Hassan, & Chong, 2014), as well as to promote their activities (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009).

A total of 11 posters published and disseminated by MELTA between 1 May to 31 December 2020 make up the sample for the present study (refer to Appendix A for the posters).

The posters were examined to investigate the representation of Malaysian English language teachers through language and visuals by drawing on the frameworks of SFL and visual grammar (Ly & Jung, 2015; Shin, Cimasko & Yi, 2020). A broader definition of English language teachers is applied in the present study to include academics in higher learning institutions as well as education department personnel such as School Improvement Coaches tasked with supporting the teaching and learning of English at schools. This is because they all appear in the posters and represent educators responsible for enhancing the quality of English language education in Malaysia.

Findings and Discussion

All eleven events which ran over eight months prominently featured English language teachers from Malaysian schools, education departments and higher learning institutions. This in itself

reflects MELTA's determination in showcasing the capacity of Malaysian educators in the field of English language teaching. All posters promoted online webinars which the association organised to promote continuing professional development among English language teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, most poster titles reflect the main focus of teachers at the time which was about managing the challenges related to the closing of schools and online instruction:

Table 2. Poster Titles and Description

Code	Webinar Title	Description
P1	Rising to the challenge: Teaching and learning during the MCO	**Teacher experiences with online teaching** A webinar describing the experiences of English language teachers during the Movement Control Order imposed in Malaysia
P2	Part 1: Let's GoFormative! Using a digital formative assessment tool to get real-time feedback Part 2: YouTube: So simple yet so engaging	**Technology for teaching and assessment** A webinar on the use of technology in the classroom presented by an academic from a public university and an officer attached to a district education office
P3	Bringing TEDEd into your classroom with Magdeline Muuk	**Conducting video-based lessons** A webinar by a secondary teacher who talks about ways to feature TEDEd in the English language classroom
P4	Creative use of WhatsApp for online teaching	**Technology for teaching and learning** A webinar on creative ways of using Whatsapp for online English language classes by a school improvement coach, with the session moderated by a teacher
P5	Highly immersive programmes Post-COVID 19: Practicality in limited space	**Teacher experiences with promoting the use of English beyond regular lessons** A webinar by primary and secondary school teachers and an academic on the

		implementation of the Highly Immersive Programme*
P6	Facilitating active participation through instructional strategies	**Encouraging active participation in classrooms** A webinar moderated by a school teacher on facilitating active student participation through instructional strategies
P7	Online webinar: From bricks to clicks	**Technology for teaching and learning** A webinar on the use of technology for online English language teaching by academics and a school teacher
P8	Action research: No research without action, no action without research	**Encouraging teachers to embrace research** A webinar on action research by a teacher trainer
P9	Flipping engagement, assessment, and collaboration with Flipgrid!	**Technology for teaching and learning** A webinar on engaging students in an online speaking lesson by an academic from a public university, moderated by a school teacher
P10	Humanising ELT classrooms: A heart to heart moment	**Teacher experiences with teaching English in rural communities** A webinar on successes in the language classroom featuring a Malaysian school teacher who received global recognition in an international event
P11	Real talk, real teachers: Our nogori champions!	**Teacher experiences with online teaching** A webinar featuring teachers who won recognition awards for their work in the Highly Immersive Programme*, an initiative by the Ministry of Education Malaysia to promote English in schools.

*The Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) is a Ministry of Education initiative to promote an environment where English is used beyond the confines of English Language classrooms, within school and through outreach activities (Pillai & Ong, 2018).

Within this set of titles, several were made up of -ing initiated non-finite clauses (P1, P2, P3, P6, P9, P10). The processes of "rising", "using", "bringing", "facilitating", "flipping", and "humanising" all have the teacher(s) as the understated actor in the clause structures. The teachers are therefore accorded the power to act, that is, to rise to the challenges (P1), to use a digital formative assessment tool (P2), to bring TEDEd into the classroom (P3), to facilitate active participation (P6), to flip engagement, assessment, and collaboration (P9), and to humanise ELT classrooms (P10). These titles serve an ideational function, creating a reality where teachers are decision makers, possessing the capacity to carry out a variety of tasks expected of them within the teaching profession.

In P3, the name of the presenter is worked into the title, "Bringing TEDEd into your classroom with Magdeline Muuk". This appears to elevate the teacher presenter to a celebrity as the title resembles names of television talk shows with popular hosts such as The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon or Late Night with Seth Meyers.

The titles also serve an interpersonal function which establishes personal relations between the teacher association in its capacity as event organiser as well as the speaker(s) and the participating teachers. This is achieved through lexical-grammatical choices. For example, the use of the first-person plural in P2, "Let's GoFormative", and P10, "Our nogori champions", serve to close ranks with a wider audience. However, it is also interesting to note that the use of such pronouns in imperative structures is also associated with establishing a divide. Kacewicz et al. (2014), cited in Markowitz and Slovic (2020) concluded in their study that those of high status (in this case, the ELT association) use the first-person plural when communicating with masses of lower status (in this case, the teacher participants). Therefore, although there is an attempt to narrow the psychological distance, power differences are reinforced.

Besides the use of pronouns, phrases like "heart to heart" (P10) create intimacy by appealing to the emotion of the audience while the colloquial use of "nogori" (P11) (meaning "state" in colloquial Negeri Sembilan Malay, a language spoken by the community in the state of Negeri Sembilan) personalises the communication with English language teachers in Malaysia as the deictic expression can only be completely understood through shared experiences (Reyes, 2015).

In other posters such as P4, P6, and P10, the background of the teacher presenter is described in some detail:

P4

Daphne Rosaline Henry Thomas has 28 years of teaching experience in both primary and secondary schools in the states of Pahang, Perak, Kuala Lumpur and Melaka in Malaysia. She is currently a School Improvement Specialist Coach (SISC+) in the Melaka Tengah District Education Office for the past 6 years. She holds a B.Ed (Hons) and a Masters in Linguistics. Her areas of interest are linguistics, teaching of English language, and the use of technology to teach language. (Sic).

P6

Farini bt Ahmad Fadil is currently a teacher at SMK Dato' Abdul Rahman Yaakub, Bota Kanan, Perak. She has taught for 19 years.

P10

Samuel Isaiah is one of the 10 finalists for Global Teacher Prize 2020. Join us and listen to his story in bringing about changes to his Orang Asli students through education. (Sic).

In P4, P6 and P10, attention is drawn to the credibility of the speakers and moderators of the events. In all three, their profession as teachers is foregrounded. References are made to their years of teaching experience (P4 and P6), and initiatives to bring change through their role as teachers (P10). The biodata in the posters serve to extend the text, and while they originate from the individuals being described, the publication of the poster by the association suggests that it is an editorial choice made to assure would-be participants about the quality of the event (Mwinlaaru, 2017). The biodata therefore serves to position teachers as experts, much like researchers who have their biodata included in their published papers.

In addition to language, the visual representation of the teacher presenters in the posters also serves to convey authority and power. As a semiotic resource, visuals in multimodal texts serve to reinforce the written message or complement it. The images of the event speakers and moderators are presented as conceptual processes where they pose for viewers rather than be seen doing something (Ly & Jung, 2015). In all but one of the 33 images of speakers and session moderators, the gaze is direct, demanding viewer engagement. The smile, again evident in all but one of the 33 images, serves to establish an affinity with the viewers. Furthermore, the portrait images with only the head and shoulders visible, serve to establish intimate relations while the image of the main speaker in P9 showing her from head to waist establishes personal relations with viewers (Ly & Jung, 2015).

Figure 1.0. Comparison of Intimacy Levels between Head and Shoulder Images and Head to Waist Images

In P10, the single image of the teacher presenter is prominently positioned in the middle of the poster, centring attention on him in relation to general and concrete information placed as the ideal and the real at the top and bottom of the poster (Shin, Cimasko & Yi, 2020). Although images of

pupils appear at the top of the poster, they fade into the background as a translucent film covers the image and words across their faces makes them unidentifiable.

Figure 2.0. Establishing prominence through centring an image

The visual focus on Samuel Isaiah (P10) is further justified through language as he is described in a brief phrase as a finalist for the Global Teacher Prize, an award given by the Varkey Foundation to recognise an exceptional teacher who has made significant contributions to the teaching profession (see https://www.globalteacherprize.org/ for details). In other posters (P3, P4, and P8), the singular image of the teacher presenters also serves a similar purpose, which is to draw the eye of viewers to them and make them the focus of the event.

Conclusion

Texts represent and construct reality within a certain ideological system, and left uncontested, these texts can serve to centre power and privileges in the hands of a dominant few (De los Heros, 2009). Narratives in Malaysia, as shaped by political elites and the mainstream media, have to some extent delegitimised the authority of English language teachers in the country (Nair & Arshad, 2018). In this paper, I have attempted to show how alternative narratives circulated by a national ELT association contest the disparaging image of the inept Malaysian English language teacher. The creation and circulation of posters by MELTA for promoting continuing professional development activities also position Malaysian English language teachers as experienced professionals possessing the expertise to address the inherent challenges of teaching English. These contesting narratives have implications for the English language teaching landscape in Malaysia. In many parts of the world, Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) are perceived as lesser than Native English-Speaking Teachers (NEST) in terms of their language skills and pedagogical knowledge (Floris and Renandya, 2020), and the mainstream narratives of inept or incompetent Malaysian English language teachers certainly feeds the same discriminatory assertions. It is not unusual to hear of schools and language centres which choose to employ individuals who fit the universal image of a NEST over NNESTs who may actually possess higher professional qualifications and more experience. Discriminatory practices are also observed in Malaysia where the absence of a formal description of Malaysian English results in Malaysian

English language learners and teachers being judged against unattainable native speaker norms (Pillai & Ong, 2018).

Floris and Renandya (2020) opine that ELT associations have a role in challenging native-speakerism and empowering trained and qualified NNESTs through professional development programme. The activities promoted through the posters which were analysed in this study were certainly geared towards providing continuing professional development opportunities. However, beyond that, the content of the posters also serves to empower the community of NNESTs by presenting Malaysian English language teachers as authorities in various areas related to ELT.

The findings presented in this paper are however limited by the small number of posters which were analysed. This is a consideration for future studies on teacher identity which draw on multimodal texts. There is a need to understand how teachers themselves shape their professional identity, and this is particularly important in the context of Malaysian English language teachers. Researchers should turn their attention to social media sites to examine how teachers assert their agency through personal narratives or dialogic communication on topics related to their professional identity.

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Article

English Language Teacher Agency in Rural Sarawak: Exploiting Teaching Materials

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores English language teacher agency in rural Sarawak, Malaysia within the context of materials exploitation. The introduction of an international textbook series in all primary schools in Malaysia has brought about significant challenges for teachers who work in socially and economically deprived educational settings, where resources are scarce and where the textbook's cultural references may be alien to the learners. In order for it to be meaningfully used in the classroom, language teachers need to adapt and localize the textbook for their learners. However, diverting from the officially prescribed material and scheme of work may be a risky business and it requires high levels of teacher autonomy and agency. The data show that although research participants find the materials in need of adaptation, not all make changes due to possible deficiencies in their capabilities or their lack of willingness to act. Those who make changes and thus enact their professional beliefs and values are motivated by completely different reasons. The study found that teachers' interpretation of their work context significantly influences their agential roles and that teacher agency emerges from an interaction of individual capability, professional action, and the professional and social contexts in which the teacher operates.

KEYWORDS: Teacher agency, textbooks, teaching materials, materials adaptation

Introduction

There is a substantial amount of professional literature on how language teaching materials can be adopted, adapted, and exploited in the classroom, but relatively little is written about how teachers actually use materials (Kiss & Rimbar, 2017; Tomlinson, 2012). This is more of a mystery in areas where the national curriculum dictates teaching materials which are culturally and socio-

economically removed from the contexts in which they are employed. Such is the case in rural Sarawak, where the Malaysian Ministry of Education mandated language teaching textbooks which are deemed difficult to implement due to their cultural content (Kiss & Rimbar, 2017). The fact, that a significant gap exists between the local students' knowledge of the world and the reality that the mandatory textbooks present, puts teachers in a difficult position. Should they adapt the materials and supplement them with locally relevant and familiar texts that would make learning meaningful for the students, or should they focus on the linguistic content of the books in an attempt to prepare their learners for oncoming examinations?

This paper focuses on the above dilemma English language teachers in rural Sarawak, a socio-economically challenged region of Malaysia, face every day in their resources-deprived classrooms. Through a questionnaire survey and a series of in-depth interviews with selected participants, the authors aimed to explore how teachers take initiatives to make a culturally alien teaching material more relatable for their learners. The data indicate that teachers realize the mismatch of the materials for the local context, and to some extent, they feel empowered to make changes they deem necessary. However, the reasons for enacting agentive roles and explore new pathways are clearly influenced by an examination culture (Cheah, 1988; Kiss & Mizusawa, 2018) that strangles grassroot educational innovations in many countries. The view that "we need teaching materials to save learners from our deficiencies as teachers" (Allwright, 1981, p. 6) should be put to rest and replaced by 'we need teachers to save learners from the deficiencies of an examination system'.

What is Teacher Agency?

Teacher agency, i.e. the ability of teachers to actively enact their educational beliefs, values in a principled manner, is an important field of current ELT research. Yet, teacher agency is not a concept that can be defined easily as it stems from the different interpretations of human agency in general. According to Goller and Paloniemi (2017), there are two types of agency discussed in the professional literature; either it is seen as an individual characteristic, or as something that originates from action related to personal or professional activities. Bandura (2001, p. 1), for example, defines agency as a capacity of humans to "exercise control over the nature and quality of one's life". Another interpretation emphasizes not this capacity, from which particular action may never realize, but the active decision-making processes and the enactment of those decisions in one's professional roles (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013).

Further definitions of teacher agency build on the interaction of the individual (including both capacity and action) and the contexts in which professional roles are performed (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). This view of agency blends in with an ecological perspective of teaching and is not far from the conceptual framework of Complex Dynamics Systems Theory which posits that elements of a system are interconnected in a non-linear and dynamic manner, and rely on feedback from within and input from outside to flourish. This theory also holds that initial conditions can have an impact on how the system reacts and small changes often lead to disproportionate results (see for example, Gleick, 1987; Larsen-Freeman, 1997, 2002; Van Lier, 2010). In other words, the whole – i.e. teacher agency – is always more than the composite parts from what it is formed.

This argument is similar to Sealey and Carter's (2004, p. 12) definition of teacher agency in which they view it as "an 'emergent property' […] generated from its constituent elements, but is not reducible to them". For them, the elements that teacher agency is constructed from are self-consciousness, reflexivity, intentionality, cognition, and emotionality. The definition, however, focuses more on the individual than on the individual's interaction with the context. Therefore, in this paper, we will use Bouchard's (2017, p. 92) definition that specifies teacher agency as "people's actions and motivations emerging from their interaction with cultural and structural forces in their attempts to fulfil particular goals and objectives" since it gives a central role to the interconnectedness of both individual capacity and the professional and social contexts in which the agentive role is enacted.

Agency and Professional Identity

There is no doubt that teacher agency and professional identity are closely related concepts. Since teacher agency partly stems from personal factors, it seems valid to cite Archer (2003, p. 120): "who we are is a matter of what we care about and the commitments we make accordingly". Therefore, in our professional capacities, we define ourselves through our choices and actions, which are influenced by knowledge, values, and beliefs, or more generally speaking, by teacher cognition (Borg, 2006). Furthermore, commitments teachers make serve as an indication of their motivation for improvement, let that be their own professional development or the improvement of learning and/or the learning conditions of their charges.

Borg's (2006) teacher cognition model, in fact, bears some similarities to conceptualizations of teacher agency. This is not surprising; how we act (or choose not to act) is strongly influenced by our experiences as learners and teachers, our socialization into teaching, and the various experiences collected as teachers. Therefore, agency depends on and is informed by many factors, including both present and past, personal and professional experiences (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015).

The Importance of Context

Contexts in which teachers enact their agentive roles are instrumental in either supporting or suppressing autonomy, as well as action. Biesta and Tedder (2007, p. 137) point out that "actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment" and add that "the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations". This explains why teachers in certain contexts find it easier to conduct themselves in a professionally independent manner whereas in another context they subscribe to what Leung (2009) calls "sponsored professionalism", i.e. the dominant views of education held and enforced by powerful stakeholders. This suggests that although teachers may have the capacity for agency, they might find it "too difficult, or too risky to enact" (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 7).

Holliday (2015, p. 21), on the other hand, is more optimistic. Although he acknowledges the difficulty some teachers may face due to contextual constraints, he argues that "this does not mean that they are culturally confined by them and do not have the potential to act when there is the opportunity." In fact, looking at contextual limitations and boundaries as completely outside of teachers' control is not an accurate representation of the issue (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). Furthermore, when teacher agency is viewed in an ecological, complex dynamic systems perspective, it is easy to see that even small changes initiated by teachers may bring about significant changes in the environment (or the other way round) and, this can empower them for further action.

Language Teaching Materials and Teacher Agency

One of the most apparent ways in which language teachers enact agential roles is when they work with teaching materials, especially with ones that are prescribed to be used by educational authorities. As Bosompem (2014, p. 106) says, "[al]though the classroom teacher is the direct user of the books, selection usually goes beyond them to involve the Ministry of Education, institutional and departmental heads". In fact, teachers experiencing materials being "imposed on them from above" (Thornbury & Meddings, 2009, p. 86) is a general practice often used as a means of 'quality control' by educational administration, or when new teaching methodologies are introduced. However, this does not necessarily lead to changes for the better or changes in practice at all (Nur, 2003).

When teachers need to use materials that they have not selected for their learners, it is inevitable that there will be a misfit between the users and the textbooks. This is, of course, experienced even when teachers have the freedom to select their own resources (Harmer, 2007; McDonough, Shaw, & Masuhara, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to make changes in the materials (Edge & Garton, 2009), and adaptation is the most commonly used practice during which texts, tasks, or activities are modified to meet teachers' and learners' needs.

There are many different techniques for teachers to adapt language learning materials and Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) summarize them into three broad areas: plus, minus, and zero. When teachers use techniques that fall into the plus category, e.g. addition, expansion, they add something more to the existing materials. When techniques in the minus category are used, e.g. deletion, subtraction, then something is taken away, either in difficulty level, length of text, the activity itself, etc. Finally, techniques in the zero category, e.g. modification, replacement, etc. do not add to or delete from the materials; they modify them with new instructions, or by changing how they are supposed to be performed (individual work turned into pair work).

Yet, changing officially prescribed teaching materials is, as Priestley et al. (2015) pointed out, may prove to be a risky business. Whether teachers decide to do so, and thus exercise a higher level of agency, or choose to follow whatever the material tells them to do, is the focus of this present paper. More specifically, we will address the following research questions (RQ):

> RQ1: To what extent do English Language (EL) teachers in rural Sarawak consider prescribed language teaching materials appropriate for their learners?

RQ2: What reasons do they have for the adaptation – or lack of – of the prescribed materials?

RQ3: In what ways do they exercise agentive roles, if at all, in the adaptation of teaching materials?

Method

Research Context

The study was carried out in rural Sarawak, Malaysia, in a setting with multicultural and multilingual communities. The standard Malaysian curriculum is used in schools that are run and maintained by the federal government. Therefore, the medium of education – except for foreign languages – is Bahasa Malaysia. Despite the best of efforts, equality and equity are not always achieved in primary and secondary education throughout the state although "addressing socio-economic differences is central to the current macro-planning in the highly publicised Malaysia Education 2013-2025 Blueprint" (Hall, 2015, p. 153). Some schools, especially those in rural areas, are without clean running water and electricity, while others are practically inaccessible in the dry season when the water level in the rivers – the main thoroughfare in some parts of the state – is low.

It is against this backdrop that the Malaysian Ministry of Education in 2018 introduced and made compulsory across all primary and secondary schools the use of two textbook series by Cambridge University Press: *Super Minds* and *Pulse* (Chin & Rajaendram, 2017). These textbooks were written for an international audience and therefore may lack relevance in contexts where the socio-economic conditions of the users are not reflective of the middle-class standards the materials portray. This raises serious questions about the appropriateness of the textbooks in the rural Sarawak context.

Research Instruments

Two instruments were used in the study: a mixed-methods online questionnaire and in-depth interviews with selected participants. The questionnaire elicited some demographic information about the teachers together with factual and interpretive information about the context in which they worked. It also asked them to evaluate the *Super Minds 2* textbook (Puchta, Gerngross, & Lewis-Jones, 2012) they were using in terms of the major language skills/areas and also whether it is culturally relevant and appropriate for their learners. Furthermore, it probed if they needed to adapt or supplement the material with other resources.

The in-depth, structured interviews were conducted over a video conferencing application, Zoom, and lasted about 45 minutes; they were transcribed for coding purposes. The interview questions were written according to Sealey and Carter's (2004) five broad areas of teacher agency: self-consciousness, reflexivity, intentionality, cognition, and emotionality. Therefore, the following areas were probed within the context of materials exploitation:

1. awareness of the conditions in which they work, e.g. how the context can enable or limit their capacity to act professionally;

2. the ability to reflect and evaluate past experiences in order for better planning and improved future action;

3. being motivated for change and making plans accordingly;

4. the ability to think logically about consequences of present and future action;

5. having positive feelings towards change and action.

Research Participants

A non-probability voluntary response sampling method was used to recruit participants to fill in the online questionnaire. The only criteria for participation were that respondents should teach English and they should work in a government primary school in rural Sarawak. Forty-five teachers responded to the call from a variety of schools. The average number of students in their schools was one hundred and sixty eight, with some schools over three hundred ninety pupils, whereas the smallest school had only twelve enrolled students. Only 8 of the teachers were non-optionists, which means that they had not received any training in English language teaching. These teachers were assigned to teach English due to the lack of trained practitioners.

Three teachers were selected for the in-depth interview by purposive sampling. The selected teachers were all trained English language teaching professionals with a reputation of being excellent teachers. This fact was testified by awards they had received during their relatively short teaching careers (3-6 years) and their role in professional social media circles. The reason for selecting these teachers was twofold. Firstly, it was important to investigate if highly capable teachers were able to enact agentive roles in the context of rural Sarawak as it would indicate whether this would be feasible for the average teacher population. In other words, if these teachers suggested that they were not empowered to make changes in the materials they used, it could be assumed that other teachers would face the same problems. Secondly, understanding the reasons for their materials adaptation processes would allow a glimpse into how teacher agency is motivated and practiced in the state. All interviews and questionnaire responses were anonymized to protect the participants' identity. Teachers in the study are referred to by a number and the letter T, e.g. T21. The third person plural (they) is used in the analysis of the teacher interviews to hide the participants' gender and make it more difficult to identify them.

Data Coding and Analysis Procedures

The questionnaire data were examined through both quantitative and qualitative means. Basic descriptive statistics were used to provide a background for the interpretation of the quantitative data, e.g. satisfaction level with the textbook. The qualitative data from the questionnaire and the interview data were coded by using NVivo 12. In the first cycle, open or thematic coding (Saldaña,

2009) was used to identify major themes or topics. This was followed by a priori coding based on Sealey and Carter's (2004) categories, and pattern coding during which existing categories of codes were expanded and collapsed to offer a better understanding of the data.

Results

Appropriateness of Prescribed Materials in Rural Contexts

To answer RQ1, i.e. "To what extent do EL teachers in rural Sarawak consider prescribed language teaching materials appropriate for their learners?" data from the questionnaire will be used.

Generally, teachers were not completely satisfied with the prescribed teaching material. They considered the textbook acceptable, giving an average of 2.7 points on a 4-point Likert scale (1- very poor; 2- poor; 3- good; 4- very good). Interestingly, there was a slight difference between trained and non-trained language teachers' views as shown in Figure 1:
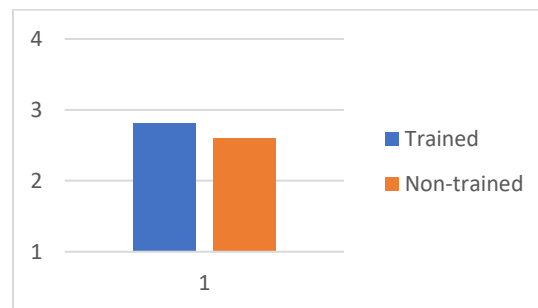

Figure 1.0. General Satisfaction with *Super Minds 2*

One possible explanation for this might be that non-trained teachers may expect more guidance from the textbook as they may lack the methodological know-how necessary to successfully use the material in the way it was intended.

There is a similar difference when individual language skills/areas in the book are examined; non-trained teachers seem to be less satisfied than their trained colleagues (see Figure 2).
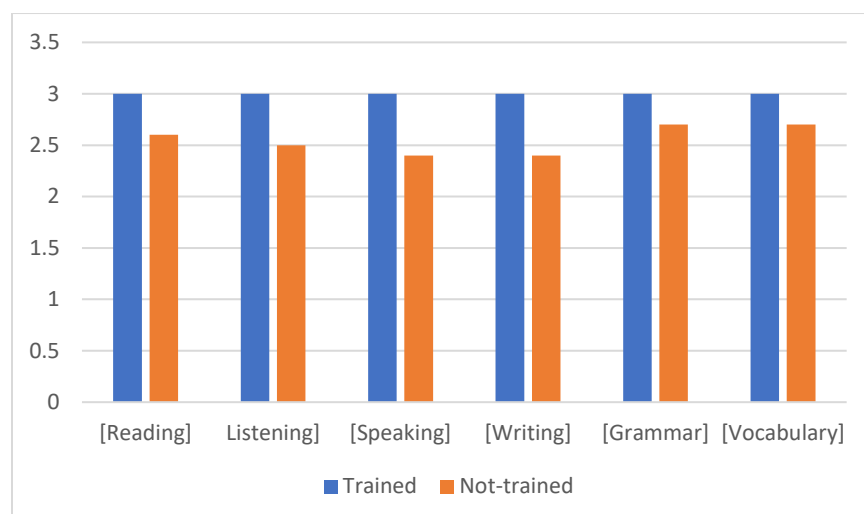
Figure 2.0. Teachers' Satisfaction with Regards to the Different Language Skills/Areas in the Material

As opposed to the earlier materials, the new textbook presents language in an integrated way where language skills, vocabulary, and grammar are taught in a meaningful context. This may go against the examination-oriented teaching methods where the language was taught in a compartmentalized manner. That 'teacher friendly' arrangement simplified the tasks that were needed to be performed in the classroom. Compared to that, teachers using the new textbook faced a more challenging task. As T48 (trained) said in the interview:

> [The new textbook] is very complicated. Grammar components are everywhere. But in the previous textbook everything was well arranged. We knew that on this page you teach about grammar. The next page we were teaching about reading, the following one teaching about writing. But this page [showing actual book] they didn't tell you which page is teaching which skill.

When a trained English language professional sees the materials in this light, then using the textbook may be a daunting task for an untrained language teacher. For them, the isolated, exam-oriented practice of drilling and decontextualized practice - often found in older materials - would perhaps give more confidence and security. The uncertainty of how to exploit this 'new' material was also mentioned by others: "Quite difficult for teacher to do lesson plan as there is no guidance provided" (T18 – trained).

The reasons for the relatively low satisfaction are also connected to the students' language levels which are deemed to be either below or higher than the level the material offers, and the lack of cultural relevance.

- Pupils in rural area are very weak in English… then, comes this type of book that we must use in the classroom… struggled enough to explain to them (T19 – trained)
- The learning contexts for the new Super minds book do not suit the pupils especially in rural area (T2 – trained)
- Language used is not too difficult (T2 - trained)

- Some of the words, phrases, sentences are too difficult for student as it is not their 1st and 2nd language (T4 – not-trained)

One trained teacher (T16) also remarked that the material is not helpful for preparing the students for their primary school leaving exam (UPSR): "Students only know some of the input and sometimes it doesn't help them in their exam especially UPSR." This was echoed by others as well, for example by T48 who said in the interview:

> I follow the book page by page, but *only after* I have taught all the six tenses. The six tenses for me is a must, because I always believed that if the students manage to master these kinds of tenses then when they absorb new vocabulary they can use this vocabulary to write more correct sentences. I managed to prove this when in 2018 I managed to break the school record by […] having a 100% passing rate at the UPSR […] so I try to use my own method […] even though we are provided with a scheme of work, to be honest, I don't even follow it.

Materials Adaptation

Since the teachers were not fully satisfied with the materials, answering RQ2 is relevant: "What reasons do they have for their adaptation – or lack of – the prescribed materials?" In order to look into this first, we need to examine what areas of the textbook they deem necessary to adapt.

There is a slight difference, again, in the answers of trained and non-trained English teachers, as shown in Figure 3 below.
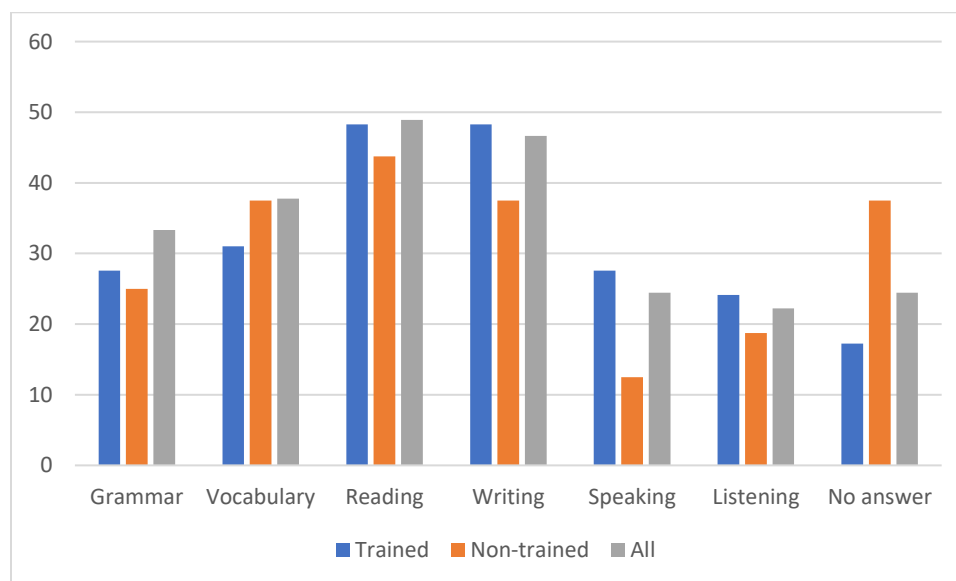

Figure 3.0. Areas of the Textbook Teachers Adapted to Fit Learners' Needs (in %).

The figure shows that the most adapted area of the textbook is the reading skills development. Most probably teachers find the texts presented in the material unsuitable for their learners, as testified by the explanations they offered. T36 explains: "Some of my students are very poor. They

never even go to the town. I need to explain about the bus, public phone and even the ATM". Therefore, some of the topics presented in the reading texts not only challenge learners linguistically, but they also struggle with understanding concepts that are alien in their own mother tongue(s) or cultural context.

It is also interesting to note that it is only in the area of vocabulary where non-trained English teachers do more adaptations than their trained colleagues. It is possible that they prefer areas where they feel in more control of the language and the content being taught than in areas where students could exercise more choices (e.g. in speaking). Furthermore, skills that are more prominently featured in the examination seem to receive more attention when it comes to materials adaptation. Many teachers (e.g. T17, T18, T23, T26, etc.) pointed out that input and activities in the textbook are 'not enough' for their learners. Yet, at the same time, they also lamented the weak language abilities of their learners. As one non-trained teacher put it, "[s]tudents' vocabulary is weak. They need guidance in actions or dual language to understand especially text form" (T39). This and similar comments perhaps suggest that teachers in the rural areas prefer exam-specific instructional methods and the use of the mother tongue in the lesson as a means of language instruction.

Teacher Agency and Materials Exploitation

Finally, it is also worth pointing out that almost one-quarter of all teachers (24.4%) do not feel the need to adapt their materials, perhaps because they either lack the technical know-how, have no other resources, or do not feel empowered to do so. This takes us to answer RQ3, "In what way do they exercise agentive roles, if at all, in the adaptation of teaching materials?" In order to answer the question in a systematic manner, Sealey and Carter's (2004) five broad areas of teacher agency have been used in the data analysis: self-consciousness, reflexivity, intentionality, cognition, and emotionality.

All three teachers showed high levels of self-consciousness and also consciousness of the limitations they faced in terms of the scarcity of resources, the imposed policies and administrative rules, and their own professional capabilities as language teachers.

Perhaps what helped them most in analysing their situations and find possible solutions to the problems they faced was their ability of reflection. They expressed both the need and the usefulness of systematic reflection on their work and the keeping of notes for further thinking and action. However, interestingly, they all went about this practice in their own individual ways. T46 believed in the beneficial effects of learning communities and was a proponent of peer observations and critiquing video recordings of lessons that could be either analysed alone or discussed together with colleagues. T47 did not only rely on colleagues in his immediate work vicinity; they were part of a social networking group that was set up at the end of their teacher training days. In this group of 14 people from the same batch of teacher trainees, members shared about their teaching, both successes and failures, regularly on a weekly basis. Apart from this, they also used the reflection part of the official lesson plan template and a private teaching journal which also served as a record of the students' life events, personal information that can be incorporated to personalize learning. To illustrate this, they explained:

For example, Victoria will have a new baby sister next week, so I will jot this down and reflect on how I can connect this into my next lesson […] so at one point this file has become a diary of my learner. It is really good because it helps me understand my kids more and they also see me as someone who is really interested in them (T47).

T48 also used a variety of reflection tools and platforms, including online social media and personal diary/ lesson notes. In sum, reflection in- and on-action helped the teachers gain a better understanding of their contexts and plan for future action.

Of course, action is only possible if there is the right amount of motivation that drives it. During the interviews, all three teachers showed high levels of intentionality. They commented that what motivates them in changing the teaching materials is that they felt it did not meet their students' needs, therefore, adaptation was inevitable to create a meaningful learning experience in the classroom. T46 explains:

Most of the time I need to adapt the context. We need localized context. So, the Super Minds book it is serving global context so for us in the rural [areas] we need to localize it. So that [the students] can understand it better. For example, there is a unit about food, right? We can introduce all the food, vegetables from the local farm […] to introduce something which is actually in the surrounding. It is useful for them.

It is interesting to note, however, that the thinking behind materials adaptation, i.e. the cognition teachers practiced, was distinctively different in each case. Whereas all three teachers were aware of the possible repercussion they might face resulting from deviation from the prescribed materials and teaching plans, they gave completely different reasons for doing it. T46, for example, said that working in a remote jungle school had one significant advantage over teaching in an urban school: there is hardly ever any inspection of the school or the teachers. In their 6 years of service, they had never been observed by the Department of Education that does regular checks on teachers in order to ensure quality education in the state.

T47 had a different reasoning for abandoning complete sections of the prescribed textbook or adapting and changing significant parts of it. They were explaining that professionalism, knowledge, and confidence is what one needs when they divert from a scheme of work set by administrators who had no knowledge of the particular local context and the students they had to work with. They claimed: "When you have your justifications and if you are brave enough to talk about it and confident that you are doing the right thing, then you have to do it. I do stuff because I know I am right and I can defend myself".

Finally, T48's reasoning why they completely ignored the prescribed textbook and the scheme of work was different from the other two. They argued that as long as the students do well in the primary school leaving exam, or in the interim tests, educational authorities would not be bothered about how the results were produced. The passing rate for T48 is indeed exceptional; all of their students (100%) manage to pass the UPSR exam, an achievement very rarely heard of in the context of rural, minority learners. Of course, such a feat comes with a price. While the other teachers' students seemed to enjoy the lessons they participated in, by T48's own admission their lessons might not be interesting to all the learners. "In terms of boring or not, even if the students

don't tell me face-to-face, I see it in their body language […] it is difficult to find something that fits their interest." It is interesting to note that T48 does not seem to consider their own exam-oriented teaching methods as the source of the lower levels of engagement; they think it is the students who are difficult to motivate.

Discussion

The major findings of the study indicate that the government assigned textbooks for English may not be appropriate learning resources in rural Sarawak, where the cultural and economic divide between the contexts presented by the materials and the learners' own social realities seem worlds apart. This is further intensified by the lack of material resources and/or professional training opportunities teachers could use to modify the texts and tasks they need to work with. Yet, despite the difficulties, (some) teachers feel empowered to change – even completely depart from – the textbooks to design lessons they believe benefit their students.

All interviewed teachers emphasized that their material adaptation was motivated by the desire to meet their learners' needs. They also agreed that they could make whatever changes they thought necessary in the prescribed materials; thus, their agentive capacity was high. However, they gave very different reasons why this was possible in their work contexts. T46 acknowledged that the lack of control by the Department of Education enabled them to make changes without the fear of repercussions. T47 was convinced that as long as they could provide a firm and professionally sound explanation for their classroom decisions, they were allowed to adapt the material to benefit the learners. Finally, T48 believed that the end justifies the means; the fact that their learners all passed the UPSR exam would entitle them to make any change they wanted. They were convinced, perhaps rightly so, that educational administration was only interested in examination results (*what*) and not the actual teaching (*how*) practices in schools. Questions about how teachers work are only asked when the results do not conform to expectations.

Looking at the results from the perspective of teacher agency, Goller and Paloniemi (2017) concepts of individual capacity and action should be revisited. The data indicate that all interview participants had the *capacity* to control their professional lives and they *acted* accordingly in order to improve their (and to some extent their learners') quality of life (Bandura, 2001) in the schools they were teaching. Whether this is true only for these well-respected professionals or it is a general trend among teachers in rural Sarawak is unknown, although the data show that 24.4% of respondents did not feel the need to adapt the textbook. This may be a sign that capacity and action may not be a general feature for all teachers in the state.

Furthermore, the importance to look at teacher agency within the context where it is enacted was highlighted by our study. Biesta and Tedder (2007) argued that agency is enabled by the context in which teachers act, rather than it simply 'happening' in there. The data show that although the educational and social constraints, i.e. lack of resources, rigid guidelines and examination structure, economically and socially marginalized learner population, have been the same for all interviewees, their interpretation of their situation and context enabled them to act independently, enacting their professional decisions (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013). This was done in full awareness that they went against officially articulated policy and regardless of the possible retributions they might have faced.

Yet, the difference in their motivation that enabled their agentive roles indicates that teacher agency is an emergent phenomenon (Sealey & Carter, 2004) that is based on a multitude of contextual and internal factors. Small changes in this educational ecosystem could easily have a large impact on how teachers act or do not act since no action might indeed be one indication of teacher agency. For example, should T48's motivation to 'produce' a 100% pass rate at the exam suffer a temporary slump, or should the current examination structure change to be more aligned with the new materials, or concerns for student engagement arise, they may follow the teaching materials more closely and thus embrace sponsored professionalism (Leung, 2009). There is evidence to believe that the same would apply to the other two interviewees, T46 and T47, who chose to enact their professional beliefs for completely different reasons. One was encouraged by the lack of control (T46), which could easily change by the introduction of a visit by a school inspector, whereas the other (T47) may lose their confidence in their professional theories, should they be confronted by an administrator equally well-informed by educational research. After all, there is no one right way of teaching.

The above argument does not aim to minimize the importance of teacher agency. Quite the contrary; it tries to highlight the need to create an educational ecosystem where all agents (teachers, administrators, examination experts, even students and parents) are valued and active contributors. A system where difference of opinion is not shunned, but appreciated and serves the dynamic growth and well-being of the whole. In fact, difference is a must, not only in terms of teacher agency to emerge, but also for the development of individual teacher identities that are shaped by past and present experiences, i.e. the feedback from the system that allows actors to be enriched both personally and professionally (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015).

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined teacher agency in the broader context of materials exploitation and looked at how English language teachers in rural Sarawak enact agentive roles when they worked with an officially prescribed textbook series, *Super Minds*. Our findings showed that teachers are generally not satisfied with the textbook because they consider it: a) alien to the local cultural context, b) linguistically challenging for most learners, or c) linguistically too easy and thus misaligned with the testing and examination practices.

The data also showed that most teachers felt the need to adapt the materials to fit their learners' specific needs. Yet, what empowered them to modify the textbook and divert from the official scheme of work depends on their own professional and individual interpretation of the context in which they work. One of the major findings of the study points to the interaction of *individual capacity*, *informed action*, and the *context* which enables teacher agency to emerge as a complex and dynamic phenomenon. Therefore, minor changes in the teaching ecosystem may bring about significant changes which could either support or suppress teachers' autonomy and motivation to enact their professional values in the classroom.

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